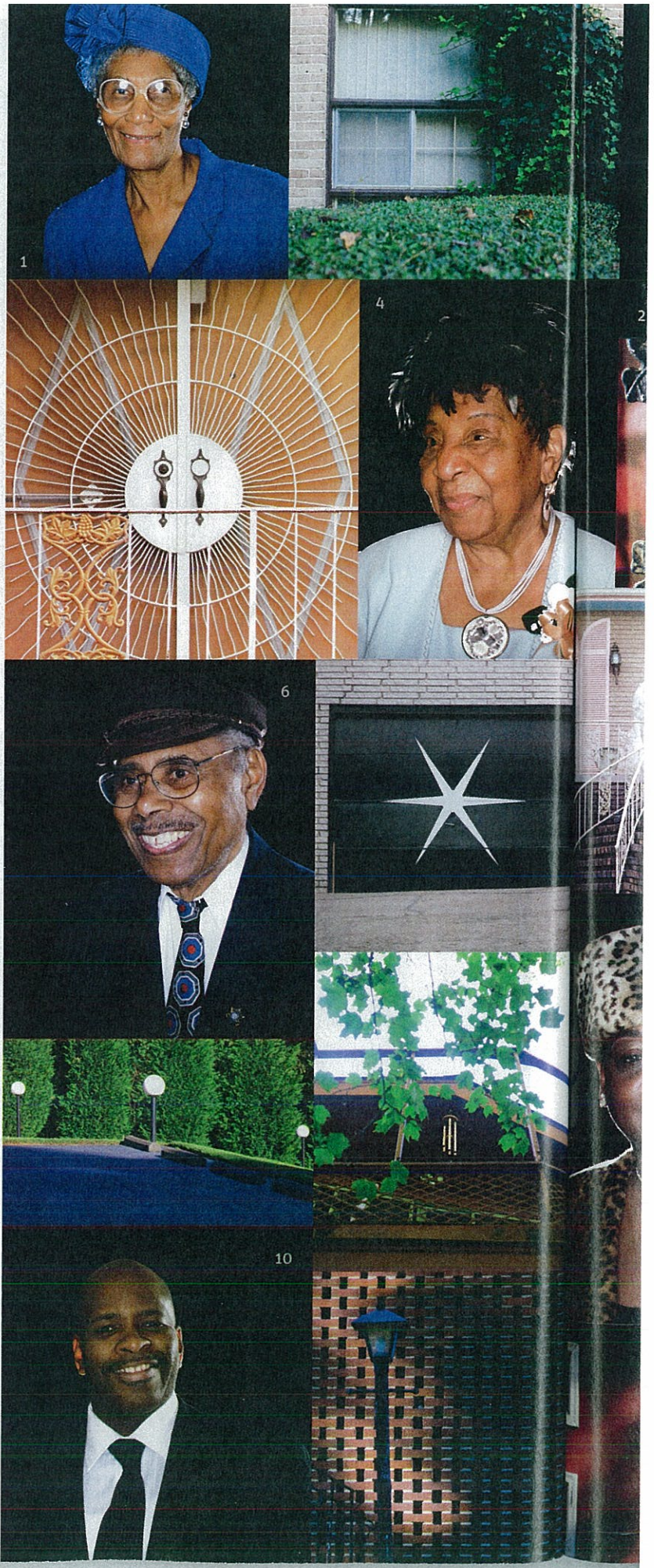
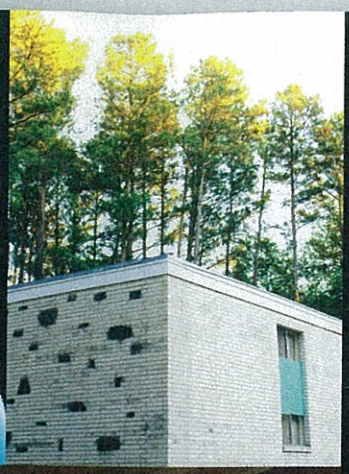
A Separate Peace

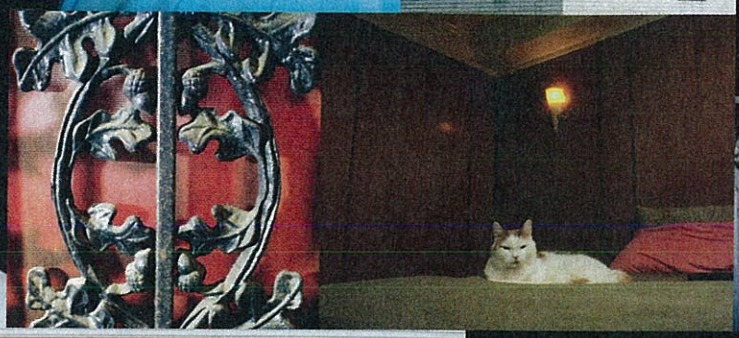
An iconic **African American** neighborhood, **home** to Kings and Hollowells and Abernathys, **makes history** again

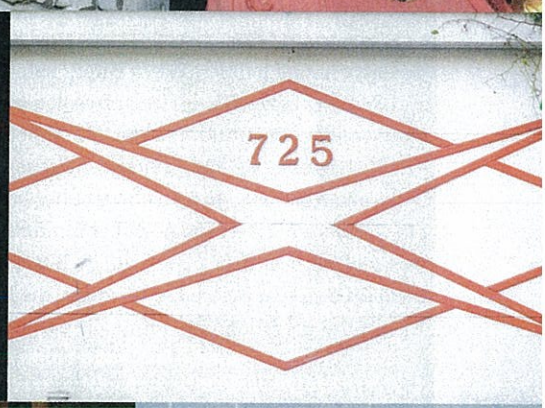
by Betsy Riley
photographs by David Walter Banks

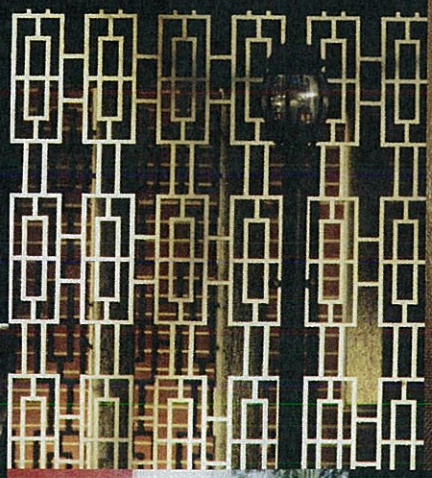


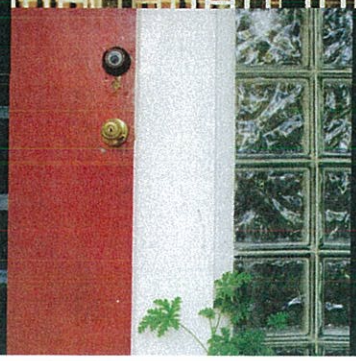
Longtime residents at the National Register celebration: **1** Dorothy C. Johnson **2** Sandra Logan **3** Mai-Lan Bell **4** Vernelle H. Hall **5** Miriam James Miller **6** Billy McKinney **7** Juanita Abernathy **8** Glenda Montford **9** Christine King Farris **10** Michael Howard **11** Jonathan Tolbert











In 1963

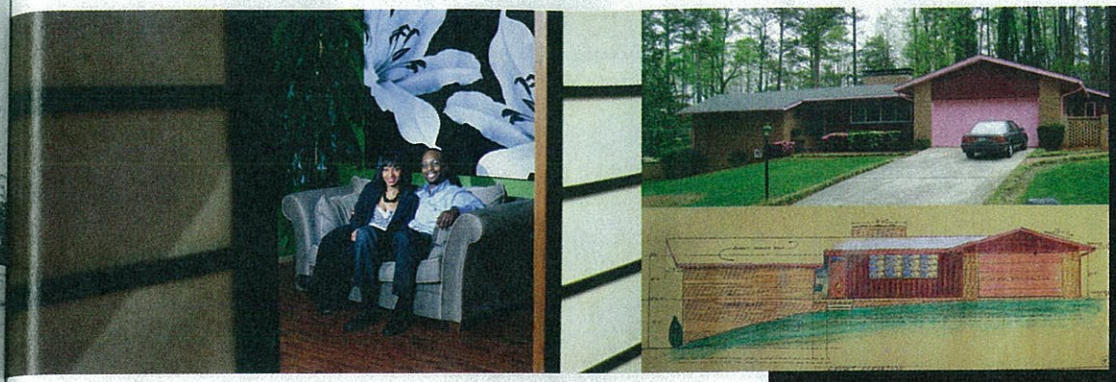
Herman J. Russell built his house on the lot that nobody else wanted. His plastering firm had just landed a mammoth contract to help construct the new Atlanta–Fulton County Stadium, so tackling a hilly residential lot seemed relatively simple. To Russell, the steep slope meant it would be easier to install an indoor pool, and the two-acre site meant there was room for a basketball court, tennis court, and a lower level with an outdoor terrace and parquet dance floor where he could party with a hundred close friends. Like all of his new neighbors, many of whom had built homes with fancy rec rooms, Russell wasn't allowed in the restaurants and hotels Downtown. The Chamber of Commerce's only African American member had to entertain at home.

November 22 was a typically hectic moving day for the Russells—parents chasing toddlers down empty hallways, directing movers and dodging boxes. Then Herman took a moment to do what any man would do in brand-new digs: He flipped on the TV. What he saw was the assassination of President Kennedy.

Juanita Abernathy had just bought her lot the year before, a few blocks over on a street so new that it didn't yet have asphalt. She was mulling over floor plans with architect J.W. Robinson, though it would be a year before her husband, the Reverend Ralph David Abernathy, got around to visiting the property. Of course, that was about the time he and Martin Luther King Jr. got thrown into a Birmingham jail and, a few months later, organized a sizable rally in Washington. So Juanita understood why Ralph couldn't get around to carpet samples.

The Russells' and Abernathys' swanky new community, Collier Heights, eventually encompassed fifty-four individual subdivisions and more than 1,700 homes, schools, and churches near what is today the intersection of I-20 West and I-285. In the tumultuous last decade before the Supreme Court ended Jim Crow segregation, Collier Heights became a virtual Who's Who of black Atlanta. Residents included the Reverend and Mrs. Martin Luther King Sr., bank president Lorimer D. Milton, civil rights attorney Donald B. Hollowell, Grady Hospital medical director Dr. Asa G. Yancey, and Georgia congressmen Leroy R. Johnson and Billy McKinney (not to mention his daughter Cynthia).

Drs. Mirian and William Shropshire in their basement rec room



LEFT TO RIGHT The modern home of the Reverend and Mrs. Martin Luther King Sr., which impressed Richard Nixon. Trisha and Carl Bacon, whose home has chic period details such as shoji screens and a kidney-shaped pool. Original elevation and photo of home designed for Mr. and Dr. C.C. Jones by J.W. Robinson's firm.

MARTIN LUTHER KING SR.'S HOME: SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES, GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY; SHROPSHIRE AND BACON FAMILIES: DAVID WALTER BANKS; JONES HOME PHOTO: GSU'S CASE STUDIES IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION, SPRING 2008; JONES HOME PLAN: COURTESY OF THE JONES FAMILY

Never before in the nation had African Americans possessed the means, the leadership, and the land to develop a modern suburb that so epitomized the American dream. Never again, at least in Atlanta, would they build one that was so exclusively their own. Loyalty to this heritage has kept the original community and its period architecture remarkably intact, a big part of why this seemingly ordinary ranch neighborhood was recently named to the National Register of Historic Places.

ONLINE
For more vintage memorabilia from Collier Heights, visit **atlanta-magazine.com.**

Collier Heights' first residents coordinated protests at Rich's department store and Grady Hospital, organized voter drives, and advised U.S. presidents. But they also raked leaves and swapped recipes and chaired PTA meetings. Their children, outside playing 3-on-3 basketball or popping wheelies on shiny new Schwinn Sting-Rays, were relatively oblivious to the social upheaval they represented. They didn't understand why busloads of tourists would pass by marveling at wealthy black suburbia. They just knew they had to be home when the streetlights came on. And perhaps their childish insouciance—their taking it for granted that they could grow up to attend the University of Georgia, or run a Forbes 500 corporation, or become president of the United States—was the greatest legacy of Collier Heights.

DOROTHY C. JOHNSON TENDERLY OPENS the oversized turquoise burlap scrapbook, labeled simply in die-cut block letters and laminated in clear contact paper, that chronicles forty-plus years of the Larchmont-Kildare Community Club. Taped to fading construction paper pages are news clippings, invitations, campaign flyers, and newsletters documenting generations of residents along the little cluster of hilly streets on the west side of Collier Heights. There are snapshots of picnics, street parties, pool parties, barbecues, and community meetings—where someone thought to invite the firemen, or bring sidewalk chalk for the kids, or recognize Katie Tuggle's ninety-first birthday, or her ninety-fifth.

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Collier Heights' Architectural Heritage

TODAY IT MAY BE HARD to envision ranch architecture as cutting-edge, but in the 1960s it was the height of chic. Inspired partly by America's love affair with California and partly by Frank Lloyd Wright, houses turned away from the street—focusing on the separation of private and public spaces, kitchens designed for stay-at-home mothers instead of servants, patios surrounded by wide backyards, and the indispensable automobile.

"When World War II ended, people were looking for something new," explains Richard Cloues, who heads the historic resources section of Georgia's Historic Preservation Division, which submitted the Collier Heights nomination for national approval. "They were looking for something that supported a more casual, family-oriented lifestyle."

"People don't understand ranch houses' significance," says Stephanie Cherry-Farmer, one of the Georgia State University students who helped research the community. "This is a phase that was incredibly influential in how we live today." But now that the genre is past fifty years old—the generally accepted criteria for historic status—ranch neighborhoods such as Collier Heights are gaining newfound respect.

It was authentic modern architecture that drew Jane Davis and Jim Gantner to Collier Heights from Sherwood Forest. "We were looking at midcentury houses, but the north side is expensive," Davis explains. "We kept looking here because we kept finding more houses reasonably priced in the right time period that people hadn't touched, that hadn't been renovated to death."

Their home, built by Lorimer D. Milton, president of Citizens Trust Bank and one of Collier Heights' founders, overlooks a creek and cost a staggering $37,000 or more when it was constructed in 1957. Davis was smitten by eccentric features such as twin doors hidden in the sleek mahogany paneling flanking a shallow marble faux fireplace (one door leads to the kitchen, and the other hides a storage closet) or the square Cinderella tub in the gray and pink master bathroom. She especially loves the vintage St. Charles metal kitchen, which she has restored using cabinetry from three different houses. Davis has painted her kitchen red and yellow, but the original had peach walls, turquoise cabinets, and multicolored, speckled laminate floors. "I'm as house-proud as I can be," she confides.

A Separate Peace

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Though there are cameos by celebrity neighbors such as Christine King Farris, Martin's sister, and Leroy Johnson, the first black Georgia senator since Reconstruction, the book mostly features ordinary folk—the same faces aging and lapels widening as the pages turn, neighborhood kids growing up and having babies of their own. "I call us the little people," defers Johnson, one of the club's only three surviving charter members. "You know the famous folk, but we're just the little people."

Her protests aside, Johnson's portrait of typical suburbia was anything but typical for African Americans in midcentury Atlanta.

After World War II, black Atlantans were confined almost entirely to three urban districts: the Old Fourth Ward; a south-side area around Pittsburg and Mechanicsville; and a smaller, more upscale area to the west around the Atlanta University schools. As soldiers returned home and farmers moved into the city, overcrowding escalated rapidly. Families doubled up, even on monied Auburn Avenue. Two-thirds of nonwhite houses were dilapidated or had no bathroom. Conditions worsened as demolition for new expressway routes and "slum clearance" measures replaced black sections with public amenities, many just for whites.

Although Atlanta's racial zoning laws, passed between 1913 and 1931, were eventually declared unconstitutional, discriminatory real estate practices prevented African Americans from moving into new areas. Lenders, including the Federal Housing Administration and the Veterans Administration, insisted that allowing minorities into white areas would lower property values. In fact, until 1950, selling to a buyer whose "race or nationality" would be "detrimental" to a neighborhood violated the ethics code of the National Association of Real Estate Boards. Restrictions prohibiting the mixture of "inharmonious races and classes" were incorporated into property deeds.

When the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed racially restrictive covenants in 1948, it removed the last "legal" means of segregation. "The game changes after 1948 . . . White homeowners start to realize that they have got to have some kind of, not illegal, but *extra*-legal type of resistance," observes Kevin Kruse, author of *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*. His book documents white opposition as it gradually became "legitimized"—less *Mississippi Burning*, more *A Raisin in the Sun*.

In the late 1940s, Alabamian Emory Burke and his cohort Homer Loomis chose Atlanta as headquarters for a short-lived, neo-Nazi party called the Columbians (after the Revolutionary War anthem "Hail, Columbia!"), writes Kruse. They targeted "endangered" working-class neighborhoods, posting signs with their red lightning bolt logo. Members dressed in khaki military uniforms "arrested" and brutalized African Americans caught trespassing, and sound trucks drove the streets, attracting hundreds of supporters to meetings near Castleberry Hill. Said Loomis, "If you see any niggers so much as walking on the wrong side of the street, stop 'em and whip 'em within an inch of their lives!"

After a year of terrorism and scattered

violence, city and state officials had had enough. The Columbians' charter was revoked and Loomis was arrested. But the oppression wasn't over, thanks to the local Ku Klux Klan, which also took up the cause of "neighborhood defense." The Atlanta Klavern counted local police officers as members, who bragged openly about murdering African Americans in the line of "duty." But given the quick fate of the Columbians, Atlanta's Grand Dragon discouraged overt violence, says Kruse. They too lost their state charter in 1947, declining further after Atlanta passed an antimask ordinance in 1949.

"Protective" community associations took over the resistance, negotiating voluntary boundaries with black real estate agents and offering to repurchase property from African Americans who tried to move beyond agreed-upon limits. Blacks cooperated in order to gain peaceful territory, albeit limited, as well as white support for utilities and basic public services. Both sides supported the politically correct objective of "community integrity"—code for racial homogeny. Creeks, access roads, cemeteries, railroad tracks, and major thoroughfares were designated as unofficial "Gentlemen's Agreement Lines" of separation. Streets changed names—Boulevard turned into Monroe Drive—to indicate divisions, or they simply stopped abruptly to discourage "encroachment."

Despite an outward display of boosterism characteristic of Atlanta for the time, the city's African American leadership was not entirely comfortable with these compromises. On the one hand, T.M. Alexander, chair of the Atlanta Business League's Housing Committee, openly bragged that "no city equals Atlanta for economic progress among its Negro citizens." He joined Mayor William Hartsfield's unofficial biracial advisory committee, the West Side Mutual Development Committee. Yet Alexander also berated the Metropolitan Planning Commission for its discriminatory land-use suggestions, writing, "No honest, intelligent Negro could, with a clear conscience, go on record as endorsing such proposals, with their insidious implications, however practical may be their application, nor how innocently they may have been inserted."

Andrew Wiese, author of *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, explains, "Integration

simply wasn't an option. The choice was really between better black neighborhoods that were separate or no neighborhoods at all . . . African Americans were very astute political players. They recognized how the game was played." Collier Heights was their end run around the system.

WHILE WHITE COMMUNITY associations were preoccupied with bickering over established intown neighborhoods, African American investors began quietly buying undeveloped land on the western outskirts of town. In 1951, the Atlanta Urban League launched the surreptitious "Project X." Businessmen, lawyers, doctors, an editor, teachers, and a housewife bought stock, with common shares going for $2 each, in a corporation that began to purchase thousands of acres of "farmland." "We jumped over the whites," AUL Housing Secretary Robert Thompson told Wiese in 1997. "As we jumped over, the whites moved further and further out . . . Got to the point where they couldn't run no damn further . . . So they went . . . into Cobb County."

In perhaps their most strategic coup, a group of African American businessmen formed the National Development Corporation to purchase 200 acres adjacent to the creek running along Waterford Road, next to an obscure, white, working-class community called Collier Heights. By the time the Collier Heights Civic Club caught on, they were surrounded.

In an urgent 1954 letter to members, the Civic Club reported that the African American real estate board had agreed to stay on their side of the creek. In return, the Club would help the newcomers get the city to pave their streets. "It is the opinion of this Committee that a vast majority of our neighborhood do not want to sell or move at this time," they stated. "It is recommended before you sign that each of you take the time to thoroughly think through and consider just what you as an individual stand to lose both *financially* and *morally* by the action of several people in the community selling to colored and leaving you or your neighbor in a predicament created by this selfish few. REMEMBER THAT COLORED CANNOT BUY UNLESS THE WHITE MAN SELLS."

Ironically, the same report noted that black real estate agents had assured them the market for new housing would be "very small." "It is the opinion of several colored real estate dealers that there is grave doubt that even twenty-five houses could be sold to the colored over a year's period." Clearly, the white residents were clueless about the overwhelming pent-up demand—not to mention the powerful resources of an affluent African American community fueled by generations of entrepreneurs and the backing of three of the nation's largest African American financial institutions: Mutual Federal Savings and Loan Association, Citizens Trust Bank, and the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. By the end of the decade, Collier Heights would become Atlanta's fastest-growing suburb.

Two months later Hartsfield's West Side Mutual Development Committee asked Collier Heights residents to vote on whether to "sell to colored." The official tally showed that fifty of ninety-eight respondents wanted the area to remain white, and thirty-

five wanted to sell—with much invective scrawled in the margins:

"Why don't they build in they're [sic] own sections?" demanded a resident on Collier Drive.

"I won't stay here and be surrounded by negroes regardless of any decision," ranted another over on Baker Ridge.

The WMDC's legalistic tabulators failed to count votes if residents expressed their opinions through commentary but failed to check a box. Counting those sentiments, the vote was strongly in favor of selling, which the residents soon did.

Bowing to the inevitable, the Civic Club eventually appointed group captains over eight homes each. When 87 percent of homeowners were convinced to move, the listings went on the market simultaneously. A few sellers fled prematurely, but neighbors chipped in to mow grass and keep up appearances. In three months, almost the entire community had changed hands without incident.

As was so often the case, the battle was more about green than black and white. "It's ultimately all about property values," says Kruse. "[Whites] are led to believe that black buyers are going to ruin their major investment. Yet when they finally get approached by black buyers, they find out these black buyers are willing to pay two or three times as much as they paid for the house. It all comes down to property. It's the fear of losing money that causes the resistance. It's the realization that you're going to make a killing that causes the resistance to crumble."

"WHEN MY BROTHER MARTIN was taken, Richard Nixon came down to express his condolences," recalls Christine King Farris. "He went first to Sunset, to my sister-in-law Coretta's. And then he said, 'I think I want to go to Dale Creek' to see my father. When he got out there, he looked around and said, 'I think you call this a *split-level*,'" she remembers with a chuckle. "I think he was surprised to see what we had in Collier Heights."

Often during the fifties and sixties, splashy ads in the *Atlanta Daily World* promoted the grand openings of Collier Heights subdivisions such as King's Grant, Woodlawn Heights, Colony West, and Crescendo Valley (built by a young Tom Cous-

ins—white builders and banks did belatedly recognize a golden opportunity). Literally thousands of black Atlantans would show up to tour model homes with improbable names such as the Monticello, the Duke, and the Seacliff—boasting state-of-the-art amenities such as built-in Hotpoint ranges, birch-finish cabinetry, bifold closets, intercom systems, sliding glass doors, paneled family rooms, and Formica countertops.

Hundreds more new residents built custom houses, some based on plans by W.D. Farmer, whose work can be seen in other neighborhoods around Atlanta, especially along Lavista Road in DeKalb County. The most affluent hired J.W. Robinson, an architect trained at Hampton University who also taught high school geometry for many years because African American architects could not obtain licenses in Georgia. (He eventually went into full-time practice and was the first African American in Georgia to become a fellow of the American Institute of Architects.)

The heyday of ranch architecture was an era of optimism and experimentation. Whimsical flourishes such as sunburst steel doors, decorative brick or concrete screens, hidden built-in panels and drawers, and ribbon windows abound in Collier Heights. There are two pagoda-style residences with curved roofs, and one circular brick home designed by Robinson for the band director of Booker T. Washington High School in 1956—a year *before* Cecil Alexander built his famous round house in Buckhead.

In fact, the only noticeable difference between homes in Collier Heights and those in other upscale, midcentury Atlanta neighborhoods is the presence of elaborate party rooms, such as Herman Russell's. Since African Americans were not allowed in restaurants and hotels, they entertained at home. And they did so in style.

A Lockheed draftsman designed Drs. Mirian and William Shropshire's basement, a Hollywood-glamorous lounge worthy of a 1960s episode of *Cribs*. Its orange leather sectional and glossy black bar stools, upholstered in orange leather with white piping, contrasted boldly with zebra-patterned curtains. A long, mirrored bar and oversized stereo speakers invited good times—as did a hobby room devoted to electric trains.

But these flamboyant dens were no shagadelic underground lairs a la *Austin Powers*. Revelers were expected to behave. Parents often hired a youthful Eldrin Bell, who would later become Atlanta's police chief, to chaperone because he looked like a teenager. "They'd have a little flask stashed outside, and they'd try to come back and pour a little in the punch," remembers Juanita Abernathy. "Oh no, Eldrin was on the ball. He had an eagle eye. Nothing got past him."

Such affluence did not escape the attention of the national media. In the *New York Times*, next to a photo of a Collier Heights ranch with a double carport, Wilma Dykeman and James Stokely opined, "The true center of the Negro's Southern middle class is Atlanta." In September 1959, *Time* magazine cited Collier Heights as among several up-and-coming African American suburbs: "These developments are all peopled by the newly prospering Negro middle class, who all seem to have one thing in common: a fever for good living . . . They settle where the air is clean and the schools good, join the PTA, buy power lawnmowers, curse the crab grass, endure the rigors of commuting,

barbecue their steaks, buy second cars and second TV sets, grumble about taxes."

WHEN RICHARD LAUB, director of Georgia State University's Master of Heritage Preservation Program, was introduced to Collier Heights in 2000, the first thing that struck him was how many original residents had never left. "The first time I went there to talk about the possibility of doing a project, I asked, 'Could I see the hands of everyone who is the only owner of their house?' Half the people raised their hands. To get that kind of access to history is a phenomenal thing." When Laub's students—who compiled the two-inch-thick nomination documents—started to count, they discovered that a staggering 95 percent of existing structures "contribute" to Collier Heights' historic character.

Though the neighborhood has suffered a bit during recent decades—eclipsed somewhat by the grander estates and McMansions along nearby Cascade Road—the torch is being firmly passed from original residents to members of a younger generation who value the neighborhood for both its social and architectural history. Their enthusiasm is reflected in real estate values, which have appreciated 3 percent in the last year, despite a dismal metro area market, according to Zillow.com.

When Trisha and Carl Bacon got married two years ago, they bought a house near where Trisha had grown up visiting relatives on Baker Ridge. It was the place her family went every year for Easter egg hunts or just to run around on summer nights, catching fireflies and rolling down the front yard hill. "I feel like I'm living in the pages of *Ebony* magazine," jokes Carl, a Delaware native who is still awed to run into Billy McKinney or Christine Farris. At last year's Christmas party, the Bacons met the Shropshires, who told Carl they reminded them of their early married days here.

Leslie Canaan, who works for the city's Bureau of Planning, learned about Collier Heights when Harold Morton, then president of the homeowners association, and others were exploring local historic designation. The first day she visited the area, she fell in love. That afternoon she started searching for real estate online, moving in just months later. "What first caught my eye, way before I knew any of the history, was the beauty of the neighborhood," she says. "The large lots, the brick ranches, how the land rolls, the trees, how quiet it is."

Michael Howard moved here from Midtown four years ago. As one of the new residents who worked to get Collier Heights registered, the young bachelor's cell phone is full of elderly neighbors on speed dial. On many streets, he explains, this is still the kind of place where people call if you leave the garage door open accidentally or where they identify your house by its original owner. "My house will always be 'the Brooks house,'" he says. "It sits on a creek, so it was 'the Brooks' on the brook.'"

The native Floridian never met the Brookses, but he has adopted their story as if they were surrogate parents. With faithfulness to period detail, he is restoring the original bathrooms—one pink and green for Hallie's sorority, the other burgundy for Freddy's beloved Morehouse. Howard went to the Atlanta Life offices and tracked

down a photo of Freddy at the home of his illustrious employer, Norris Herndon. And he tells how Hallie, a librarian at the Atlanta University Center, used to host formal meetings of the Chautauqua Circle in her Florida room. Her club was inspired by the New England–based cultural movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This local chapter was exceptional because it was organized exclusively by African Americans; it is also the only surviving Chautauqua in Atlanta and remains active today.

But there seems to be an extraordinary history behind every Collier Heights home. The original residents claimed countless African American firsts—Dr. William Shropshire as president of the state dental examining board (his wife Mirian was an internist, one of several pioneering female physicians here), Lithangia Robinson as president of the Georgia Association of Educators, Howard Baugh as the first Atlanta Police superior officer, and the list goes on.

So when word spread last summer that Collier Heights had been accepted onto the National Register, the neighbors planned a celebration that was about more than innovative architecture.

On October 18, neighbors and supporters gathered at Atlanta-Berean Seventh-day Adventist Church, whose tall, white steeple has long sat across from the entrance to Collier Heights. There were original homeowners in regal suits and elaborate hats, second-generation residents or even third, racing along pews—plus political candidates looking to get in a good word. A four-color, fifty-page program bore well wishes and memories from families, clubs, and yet more politicians, including Congressman John Lewis and Governor Sonny Perdue.

There were prayers and speeches and original poems. The Frederick Douglass High School Ensemble performed "Community in My Life." But there were also hints that the struggle isn't over. The neighborhood must stay vigilant to keep winning battles with litter, absentee landlords, and crime (which was reduced by more than half in 2009 versus 2008). With the fervor of a Baptist preacher, then community association president Antavius Weems thundered, "We will fight until hell freezes over, and then we will fight on the ice."

The new national and state historic designations will provide some tax incentives for rehabilitation, but they will not protect the community from inappropriate development or deterioration. To residents' chagrin, a handful of nonperiod houses have been erected on vacant lots, and speculators have let some houses lapse into foreclosure. Effective safeguards require local historic designation, and budget cuts at the City of Atlanta's Bureau of Planning have stalled the neighborhood's request (though the bureau may revise how applications are financed in 2011 to expedite the process).

Laub notes, "It's really tragic that this neighborhood says to the City of Atlanta, 'Please protect us,' and they can't do it. I live in Inman Park. It took us ten years to get neighborhood [cooperation like this], and really the thing that put us over the edge was the destruction of some houses. People said, 'How can this happen when we're on the National Register?' Well, it can happen because there's no protection afforded by the National Register."

LITHANGIA MURRAY WISHES she still had her mom's black 1962 Studebaker Gran Turismo Hawk—the one with a bright red vinyl interior in honor of her mom's alma mater, Clark College. At Christmastime, the whole family would pile in and cruise around Collier Heights. Each section chose an annual theme—carolers, the Madonna, candles—and competed for the best decorations. Murray still remembers the year her subdivision, the Valhacha Community Club, won for "I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas." Mrs. Myrtle Sinclair designed the trees, dramatically lit and draped in sparkling silver cloth and white netting.

Everyone would meet up afterward at Union Baptist Church for the live outdoor nativity pageant, she remembers. There would be real lambs and camels, and her friends played characters in the holy drama—tennis shoes and jeans hidden under their robes for warmth.

"People don't realize what people had to go through" to make the community so cohesive, Murray says. "It didn't happen by accident . . . People don't know the sweat and the tears and the things that people did so that we can enjoy things now. It's like we're losing a part of our history . . . I remember my friends from Boston seeing how black people lived here; they couldn't believe it." ■