

Sweet Auburn

Black Atlanta's Main Street



*Auburn Avenue street sign
Credit: GSU.edu*

For decades, dating back to the years after the Civil War, Auburn Avenue was a center of Atlanta's Black community. Organizations that would become legends far beyond the city limits – like WERD radio and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference – called Auburn Avenue home. Businesses and institutions that served and informed the local Black community – such as the Atlanta Daily World and Big Bethel Church – could be found on Auburn Avenue and its surrounding streets.

Throughout its history, Auburn Avenue has been home to businesses, schools, houses of worship, entertainment venues, and generations of Atlanta residents. Stories of the Auburn Avenue neighborhood are innumerable. Here, we will focus on

some of the places and people who have played a part in the history of the neighborhood often referred to as “Sweet Auburn.”

The Prince Hall Masons Grand Lodge

Built during the tenure of longtime masonic Grand Master John Wesley Dobbs, the Lodge has been an Auburn Avenue fixture since 1937. Over the years, a variety of businesses and organizations have operated out of the building, including an insurance company, a dentist, beauty shops, and several other fraternal organizations. It was the longtime home of WERD, the first American radio station owned by an African American, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an iconic civil rights organization.



*Prince Hall Masons Grand Lodge
Credit: mwphglga.org*

Atlanta Daily World

In 1928, William Alexander “W.A.” Scott founded the newspaper that came to be called the Atlanta Daily World. At the paper's founding, coverage of news of significance in the Black community was scarce. Committed to covering topics of interest to Atlanta's Black community, Scott headquartered the paper in the center of the community, on Auburn Avenue. Originally a weekly newspaper, Scott quickly built it into one of America's first Black-owned daily papers. In the years to come, W.A. Scott's brother and granddaughter would run the company, all the while maintaining its Auburn Avenue headquarters. The Daily World would cover civil rights struggles, elections, education and a host of other topics. In 2008, following a destructive tornado, the Atlanta Daily World left its home of over six decades. Today, the paper continues to be an informative resource and the Auburn Avenue site it long called home is now commercial and living space.

Big Bethel A.M.E. Church



Big Bethel A.M.E. Church
Credit: Wikimedia Commons

Founded in 1847 by a group of enslaved men and women, the Auburn Avenue congregation now known as Big Bethel A.M.E. Church has survived war, fire, and a constantly changing city. Over the course of its history, Big Bethel has been a part of the community, benefitting its Auburn Avenue neighbors and the greater city of Atlanta. In 1879, the church was the founding home of the Gate City Colored School, the city's first public school for African Americans. A few years later, Big Bethel provided a first home for the school now known as Morris Brown College. The church has long worked to help Atlantans in need of food, clothing, and housing.

Big Bethel has been a constant more than a century and a half of change on Auburn Avenue.

Odd Fellows Building and Auditorium

The Odd Fellows Building, at Auburn Avenue and the present-Jesse Hill Jr. Drive, gets its name from the Grand Order of Odd Fellows, the primarily Black fraternal organization that constructed it. In addition to the group's headquarters, the circa 1912 building featured retail, office, and entertainment spaces. Over the years, it has been home to The Atlanta Independent newspaper, a location of Gate City Drug Store, and *Baileys Royal Theatre*, said to be the only Atlanta movie house where Black patrons could be seated on the main floor.

Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church

Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church has been an Auburn Avenue landmark for more than a century. The sanctuary and the congregation are intertwined with the life of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. His grandfather, A.D. Williams, and his father, Martin Luther King Sr., were both pastors there. Baptized at the church, he would serve during part of his father's tenure as a co-pastor at Ebenezer. Following his death in 1968, the younger King was eulogized at his funeral in the sanctuary. By 1999, time and years of tourists had taken their toll on the building and the congregation moved to a new home across the street. Today, the restored historic sanctuary is part of the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Park.



Historic Ebenezer Baptist Church
Credit: National Park Service

Alonzo Herndon

Alonzo Herndon survived a childhood marked by enslavement and destitution to become Atlanta's wealthiest Black citizen. Raised in Social Circle, Georgia, Herndon made his way to Atlanta as a young adult. There, he made his fortune working in - and eventually owning - well-respected barbershops. Herndon parlayed the wealth accrued through the barbershops into investments in real estate and businesses, including a once-failing mutual aid association that he transformed into the Atlanta Life Insurance Company. For more than a century, Herndon's company was headquartered on Auburn Avenue.

John Wesley Dobbs

It is nearly impossible to discuss the vibrancy of Auburn Avenue and not mention John Wesley Dobbs. A postal service railway mail clerk by trade, Dobbs became a force in Atlanta civic and political circles. The Grand Master of the Prince Hall Masons for thirty years, Dobbs tirelessly worked to advance Black suffrage in mid-20th century Atlanta, founding the Atlanta Civic and Political League and co-founding the Atlanta Negro Voters League as a means of increasing Black voter registration. It was due at least in part to John Wesley Dobbs' political power that Mayor Hartsfield hired the city's first Black police officers, who initially were stationed in an Auburn Avenue-adjacent YMCA. His activism in the neighborhood led to Dobbs being known as the "mayor" of Auburn Avenue. After all, it was Dobbs who coined the phrase "Sweet Auburn" to describe the lively district.



John Wesley Dobbs
Credit: SweetAuburn.us

The story of Auburn Avenue extends far beyond the people and organizations mentioned here. Auburn Avenue's story is one of successes and struggles, of activism and adversity. All of this has helped to shape Auburn Avenue.

- Takeaways:**
1. The historic nature of "Sweet Auburn".
 2. Auburn Avenue as a center of political, religious, and social life for Black Atlanta

* Images have not been cleared for use. Author holds no rights to images. *