



National Park Service
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National Park Service News Release

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National Park Service seeks public comment in large-scale review of Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark District

- *Agency welcomes public's participation at local meetings and online*
- *Report identifies current condition, key threats to district's long-term preservation*

ATLANTA — The National Park Service (NPS) will hold public meetings this week as part of the agency's most comprehensive effort to assess how well the historic integrity and condition of Atlanta's [Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark \(NHL\) District](#) has been preserved to date.

The meetings — to be held on September 19 at Big Bethel AME Church — will center on a report NPS contracted New South Associates, Inc. to produce that will enable NPS to measure the preservation health of the district, identify threats to its long-term sustainability as an NHL, and assign it a condition category of Satisfactory, Watch, Threatened or Emergency.

"The late nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial, residential and religious buildings in the Sweet Auburn district illustrate African American agency and community and institution building," said Cynthia Walton, National Historic Landmarks regional program manager for the National Park Service in Atlanta. "It is necessary to identify where integrity is threatened or has been lost to prevent further diminishment of the district's historic character."

Key Findings from the Draft Integrity and Condition Assessment

The draft [Integrity and Condition Assessment Report](#) prepared by New South Associates, Inc. and published today by the NPS results from a process launched in September 2018. The assessment involved conducting research, a complete survey of the district, photographic documentation, Geographic Information Systems analysis and mapping, and forums with local historic preservation professionals and stakeholders with knowledge of the district. The report documents major changes that have occurred within and adjacent to the district since its designation in 1976.

Key findings published in the draft report indicate:

- The Sweet Auburn NHL District lost nearly half of its historic buildings (24 in all or 47 percent) since its designation as an NHL in 1976, resulting in a loss of integrity of design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. The losses are largely due to new construction and tornado damage.
- The Atlanta Life Insurance Company, Butler Street YMCA, Walden building and commercial building located at 253-255 Auburn Avenue remain vacant after several years and are at risk

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for deterioration and demolition by neglect. The loss of these buildings could be detrimental to the district's standing as an NHL.

- Construction of the seven-story, mixed-use Renaissance Walk development completed in 2008 in the heart of the district dwarfs neighboring structures. Further, its mass, scale and height diminish the integrity of the district's design and historic character.
- The six-story apartment building located at 200 Edgewood Avenue constructed in 2016 and the 11-story student housing mid-rise Piedmont Central building located at 92 Piedmont Avenue and constructed in 2016 are in less sensitive portions of the district and do not impose significant negative impacts on the district's integrity.
- The north and west boundary lines along John Wesley Dobbs Avenue and Piedmont Avenue, respectively, are in poor condition and face the potential for encroaching development and/or suffered historic integrity loss; the southern boundary running west from Piedmont Avenue to Bell Street is the district's strongest section; and the Bell Street, Edgewood Avenue and Courtland Street boundary areas are all in fair condition.

The study team identified encroaching development, vacant and neglected properties, incompatible construction, weak boundary areas, and the absence of archaeological ordinances as threats to the district's preservation and standing as an NHL.

Stakeholders and community members engaged early in the New South Associates study process cited concerns and issues that could negatively impact future efforts to preserve the district, including gentrification, the need for a coordinated vision, a general lack of appreciation for the district, inadequate civic engagement in the city's design review process, insufficient funding to support stabilization and complementary development, increasing property tax rates, and the inability to influence development by Georgia State University in the district since it is a state entity and not subject to local ordinances. Respondents were encouraged by positive developments, such as the emergence of advocacy groups, adaptive reuse of the *Atlanta Daily World* building, establishment of the Eastside Tax Allocation District, the new streetcar and the increased customer base spurred on by the presence of Georgia State University students and employees.

Opportunities for Public Commenting

NPS will consider public comments on the draft Sweet Auburn NHL District Integrity and Condition Assessment prior to making a final determination about the district's condition category and issuing the final report next summer.

- **The public can learn more about the Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark District Integrity and Condition Assessment by visiting** <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/sweetauburn>.
- This week, NPS will hold public meetings where New South Associates will present its study and findings and offer an opportunity for audience feedback. **Public meetings will be held on September 19 from 10:00 to 11:30 am and 6:00 to 7:30 pm** at Big Bethel AME Church, Fellowship Hall, located at 220 Auburn Avenue NE, Atlanta, GA 30303.
- **Public comments can also be submitted** online through October 28, 2019 at <https://parkplanning.nps.gov/sweetauburn>.

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About the Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark District

Designated in 1976 by the Secretary of the Interior, the Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark District comprises 18.8 acres and is home to or adjacent to several landmark buildings considered highly significant to the area and the nation's African American history.

The district features small-scale commercial buildings, traditional storefront designs with historic tiled exterior entries, narrow thoroughfares, paved sidewalks, minimal landscaping, and iconic viewsheds punctuated by the Big Bethel AME Church steeple and the Butler Street YMCA and Odd Fellows Buildings' rooflines. It's overall significance to American history was identified in the accompanying National Register and NHL nominations as being best conveyed in the areas of commerce, economics, social/humanitarian and African American history between 1865 and 1930.

The district was considered the hub of African American prosperity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Originally named Wheat Street and renamed Auburn Avenue in 1893, the street was the heart of Atlanta's black business district during the segregated Jim Crow era, birthed some of the most successful black businesses in the country and contributed to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s formative development. African American businesses converged on the west end of Auburn Avenue, increased in number from 10 to 72 between 1900 and 1920 and eventually led the nation in the concentration of black-owned businesses.

In 1975, then Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson initiated the "Sweet Auburn project," a revitalization initiative steeped in preserving the area's historic integrity while restoring economic opportunity. From that effort emerged the *Sweet Auburn Comprehensive Urban Design Plan for Auburn Avenue, Atlanta*, which formed the basis of the Sweet Auburn Historic District National Register nomination and NHL designation.

About the National Historic Landmarks Program

The [National Historic Landmarks Program](#), established in 1935, is administered by the National Park Service on behalf of the Secretary of the Interior. The agency works with preservation officials, private property owners, and other partners interested in nominating properties for National Historic Landmark designation. The NHL Program provides states and local communities technical assistance, recognition, and funding to help preserve our nation's shared history and create close-to-home recreation opportunities.

NHLs are described according to their condition to provide a measure of the health of an NHL in terms of its ability to convey the significance that led to its designation. The categories include:

- Satisfactory (Priority 3) indicates there is no known current or potential threat to the landmark;
- Watch (Priority 2) indicates NHLs that face impending actions or circumstances that likely will cause a loss of integrity;
- Threatened (Priority 1) indicates NHLs that have suffered, or are in imminent danger of, a severe loss of integrity and
- Emergency indicates recent catastrophic damage has occurred that requires immediate intervention.

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