



# United States Department of the Interior

## NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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### Memorandum

To: Acting Regional Director, Interior Region 2 *Cassini M. Paul*

From: Acting Chief, Cultural Resources, Partnerships and Science

Subject: Health of the Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark (NHL) District

The National Park Service (NPS) recently completed a study focusing on the integrity and condition of the Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark (NHL) District. An NHL is a place with “exceptional value or quality in illustrating and interpreting the heritage of the United States.”<sup>1</sup> While most communities include special places that are important to local or state history, only a few are important to American history as a whole. Places like the Sweet Auburn NHL District help us to understand the most significant patterns, movements, and themes in American history.

The Sweet Auburn neighborhood in Atlanta, Georgia, is centered along a stretch of Auburn Avenue that includes small-scale commercial, residential, and religious buildings associated with Atlanta's African American community dating from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century. In the early twentieth century Auburn Avenue was a thriving center of African American commercial, social, religious, and political activity. John Wesley Dobbs (1882 —1961), an African American civic and political leader, coined the name "Sweet Auburn" referencing the prosperity and opportunity afforded by the neighborhood.

The Secretary of the Interior designated the Sweet Auburn NHL District in 1976. The boundaries of the NHL District are smaller than what many people consider to be the Sweet Auburn neighborhood which was physically split by the Downtown Connector in the 1960s. The NHL District is an irregularly shaped district that abuts the western edge of the Downtown Connector and runs along a central axis on Auburn Avenue for a little over a quarter of a mile westward to Courtland St NE. Prominent buildings within the Sweet Auburn NHL District include Big Bethel AME Church, the Butler Street YMCA, the Odd Fellows Building and Auditorium, the Herndon Building, and the Municipal Market (Sweet Auburn Curb Market).

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<sup>1</sup> 36 CFR 65.4(a)

Historic districts like the Sweet Auburn NHL District are challenging to preserve. They are often vibrant commercial and social centers, which must adapt to meet the needs of local residents and visitors. Furthermore, no single entity can care for a historic district alone. Federal, state, and local governments, along with private groups and individuals, share in the stewardship responsibilities. Adding to the complexities of managing a historic district are the wide-range of resource types they contain. The NPS is part of a team devoted to the care and stewardship of the Sweet Auburn NHL District. Considering the national significance of the district, its size, and the many management challenges it faces, it is important that the NPS take an active role in supporting local and state officials, private groups, and individuals in their efforts to preserve the NHL District.

### **National Historic Landmark Program Role**

The NPS administers several preservation assistance programs, including the NHL Program, to promote historic preservation and community revitalization. NHLs are nationally significant historic places designated by the Secretary of the Interior because they possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States. Today, just over 2,600 historic places bear this national distinction. Working with citizens throughout the nation, the NHL Program draws upon the expertise of NPS staff who guide the nomination process for new NHLs and support existing NHLs. Designation as an NHL places no restrictions on property owners (including private citizens, state, and local governments) who are responsible for the care of NHL properties.

The NPS is charged with maintaining a continuing relationship with NHL owners, monitoring NHLs, and advising owners on accepted preservation standards and techniques (36 CFR 65.7). Through a condition assessment, the NPS monitors and provides information about the health of landmarks so that owners, stewards, policy makers, and the public can take steps to preserve NHLs. The NPS monitoring of condition is particularly useful for identifying NHLs that exhibit known or anticipated damage or threats to their integrity. NHL designation would be withdrawn only if the qualities for which a historic property was originally designated were lost or destroyed (36 CFR 65.9).<sup>2</sup>

### **Sweet Auburn NHL Integrity and Condition Assessment**

To support the stewards of the Sweet Auburn NHL District and the District's preservation partners understand the current condition of the District, the NPS commissioned a study, prepared by New South Associates, to document in narrative and graphic formats the major changes that have occurred within and adjacent to the District since its designation in 1976. The contractor was directed to

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<sup>2</sup> The term "historic property" is used to refer to any prehistoric or historic district, site, building, structure, or object included in or eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. This is a common term used by preservation professionals and comes from the National Historic Preservation Act (54 U.S.C. §300308).

prepare a report describing and analyzing the current integrity and condition of NHL District as a whole, using the NHL bulletin, [\*How to Prepare National Historic Landmark Nominations\*](#).<sup>3</sup>

To aid in the study, NPS staff collaborated with representatives from the Georgia State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Historic Atlanta, Sweet Auburn Works, The National Trust for Historic Preservation, The Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, City of Atlanta, Atlanta Regional Commission, Central Atlanta Progress, Historic Atlanta, Georgia State University Heritage Preservation Program, Atlanta Preservation Center, Atlanta City Council, and Board of Regents from the University System of Georgia, among others.

The study, which began in September 2018, involved research, a reconnaissance survey, photographic documentation, Geographic Information Systems (GIS) analysis and mapping, and several means of public involvement throughout to gather local area knowledge and inform areas of investigation. Occurring at the start and the end of the project, the NPS hosted and facilitated forums consisting of local historic preservation professionals, major landowners, and parties with a demonstrated interest in the NHL District. Following these forums and throughout the course of the project, the NPS also solicited public comment through an online project website (<https://go.nps.gov/sweetauburn>).

The resulting study, [\*Integrity and Condition Assessment: Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark District\*](#) (the study), which completed in 2019, definitively demonstrates that the Sweet Auburn NHL District retains the qualities for which it was originally designated as an NHL; confirms that the NHL designation is merited; and that the District is not a candidate for de-designation. The study found that “as a whole, the district’s remaining historic buildings continue to convey the sense of time and place of a small-scale historic commercial area dating from the 1910s to the 1960s.”<sup>4</sup> The study highlights a number of preservation successes, for example the rehabilitations of the Municipal Market and Odd Fellows Building as well as the establishment of Sweet Auburn Works, a nonprofit working as an advocacy liaison for the community.

However, the study also showed that the Sweet Auburn NHL District has lost 47% of contributing buildings, largely due to new construction and natural disasters, and faces preservation challenges. No one project was identified as *the* “threat” to the NHL District. Rather, numerous challenges and issues were identified: these challenges include encroaching development; vacant and neglected properties; incompatible construction; and the vulnerability of resources not specifically addressed in the NHL nomination such as archeology. These issues are discussed in more detail below.

### **Challenge: Encroaching Development**

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<sup>3</sup> *National Register Bulletin: How to Prepare National Historic Landmark Nominations* (Washington D.C.: National Park Service, 1999) 36-37.

<sup>4</sup> Tyson, Jackie. *Integrity and Condition Assessment: Sweet Auburn National Historic Landmark District*. (Stone Mountain GA: New South Associates, 2019) 76.

New construction within and on the periphery of the NHL District (specifically the northern and western areas) has occurred in recent years and will continue as large institutional property owners look for new development opportunities.

- Georgia State University (GSU) is the largest of these property owners and as the university looks to expand its campus, the district will continue to feel its presence in both positive and more concerning ways. On a positive note, GSU has elected to adaptively reuse three of the buildings in the district in recent years. It is important to note, the university, as part of the Georgia Board of Regents, is not subject to local zoning ordinances and has the freedom to change and demolish buildings without having to adhere to the local historic district codes and review process.
- The Atlanta Beltline pedestrian path as well as the streetcar have been a boon for the area; both developments constructed informational waysides within and surrounding the NHL District. This development has also created elevated real estate values, making the area harder for the longtime businesses to afford to remain.

#### **Challenge: Vacant Properties and Buildings**

A major problem within the NHL District includes the presence of vacant and neglected buildings, several of which are highly important to the history of Sweet Auburn, the greater Atlanta area, and the nation.

- Several important buildings (Atlanta Life Insurance, the Butler Street YMCA and YMCA Boys' Branch, the Walden Building, Atlanta Life Insurance Branch office among others) have fallen out of use and have remained vacant, leaving them vulnerable to demolition due to deterioration. The loss of these buildings would severely diminish the NHL District's integrity.
- Since its designation in 1976, almost half of the district's historic buildings have been demolished. This loss impacts the rhythm of streetscape as most of the lost buildings have not been replaced by newer infill. This has resulted in vacant lots that could be developed in the future, stressing the need for compatible in-fill.
- A program of Invest Atlanta (the official economic development authority for the City of Atlanta), the Eastside Tax Allocation District (Eastside TAD) was established in 2003 to join the Westside TAD with the purpose of rebuilding Downtown Atlanta by attracting new private investment and improving local streetscapes. Despite a surge in development in many of the city's urban areas, much of the Eastside TAD has yet to see the same kind of investment that has occurred in nearby neighborhoods and has continued to struggle and remains mostly vacant or underutilized except for governmental uses.

#### **Challenge: Incompatible Construction**

The District's integrity may be further diminished by buildings that are not compatible in scale and design with the historic buildings.

- Infill construction, such as the Renaissance Walk, for the Sweet Auburn NHL District is regulated through the City of Atlanta Zoning Code for the Martin Luther King, Jr. Landmark District. The zoning code for the district has certain design requirements that need to be met before new construction is approved. The quality of new design relies on the strength of the city's zoning process and one of the largest landowners in the area, GSU, is not subject to local ordinance.
- The strength of the city's design review process lies in the commission's interpretation of the code, as well as the public's involvement in the process. Multiple, online and in-person comments provided throughout the project, noted the inadequacy of interaction between the City and community as well as improved engagement.

### **Other Considerations: Archeological Sites**

Although not identified as a resource within the National Historic Landmark documentation, there are almost certainly archeological materials associated with the history of Sweet Auburn present in the district. These archeological remains could tell us more about the people who lived in, worked in, and visited Sweet Auburn. With no archaeological ordinances in place, Atlanta's historic resources preserved underground are continually lost when the disturbed and forever altered as part of new construction activities.

### **Current Condition Category, Monitoring, and Recommendations**

As mentioned previously, overall, the Sweet Auburn NHL District retains integrity and continues to meet the requirements of the NHL program. The preservation of the Sweet Auburn NHL District is a testament to the hard work and dedication of many groups and individuals, including the National and Georgia Trusts for Historic Preservation, the City of Atlanta, Sweet Auburn Works, Historic Atlanta, and other groups and countless individual private property owners and advocates.

The challenges addressed in this memo are not a reflection on the efforts of the groups listed above. The challenges are complex, stem from multiple sources, and will require concerted effort and collaboration to address. As a result of these varied challenges, NPS is providing some preservation practices or tools that can be developed to facilitate management and improve the overall health of the District:

- Consideration should be given to updating the NHL District's documentation. An updated nomination would establish a more specific period of significance, consider new areas of significance, and consider resources, such as archeology, which were not evaluated previously. An updated nomination would serve as a baseline, which would help in the management of the District.

- Consideration should be given to developing methods of review that consider the NHL District more holistically. The Secretary of Interior’s Standards were revised in 1992 so that they could be applied to all historic property types, including districts and cultural landscapes. Their application on a district-wide level could better inform decisions. For example, when a large-scale construction project is proposed, it would be beneficial to consider the visual impact of the new construction from all areas of the District and the subsequent affect to the entire District.
- Invest Atlanta is accepting applications for eligible projects within the Eastside TAD, with preference given to projects within Sweet Auburn, South Downtown and the Memorial Drive corridor that provide Affordable Housing, expand Economic Development, focus on Historic Preservation, and/or are supported by Non-Profit Sponsors providing services with public benefits. The Sweet Auburn NHL District has a multitude of preservation partners that could assist individuals with project applications.
- The Sweet Auburn NHL District benefits from multiple preservation partners with knowledgeable staff, although the community perceives a lack in civic engagement during the city’s design review process. The City could improve the exchange of information by utilizing a variety of platforms, both digital and print, to better publicize any projects under review.
- Parties surveyed as part of this study commented upon the lack of publicity of the District’s historic significance. Sweet Auburn Works and other preservation parties might investigate other avenues of digital publicity such as a story map or utilizing QR codes to link to various Sweet Auburn affiliated stories and sites. Please see the below initiative by UrbanMain and the National Trust for Historic Preservation in the next section which will aid in this effort.

## **Moving Forward**

The NPS is part of a team devoted to the care and stewardship of the Sweet Auburn NHL District. Considering the national significance of the district and the many management challenges it faces, it is important that the NPS take an active role in supporting local and state officials, private groups, and individuals in their efforts to preserve the NHL District. The National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP) concurred with much of the analysis contained in this report and requested a partnership with the NPS to assist in “assessing and protecting” the Sweet Auburn NHL District; the following two projects were proposed since the completion of the report in 2019:

1. In 2019, the City of Atlanta began organization of Atlanta UrbanMain, a city-sponsored effort focused on the revitalization of historic commercial centers located across Atlanta's urban landscape. In October 2020, Atlanta UrbanMain and the National Trust for Historic Preservation partnered with Sweet Auburn Works to develop an UrbanMain pilot program in the larger Sweet Auburn Area. Grounded in deep community engagement, the coalition’s

goals are to provide technical services, research assistance, and educational workshops to contribute to revitalization efforts. This will culminate in recommendations focused on partnership opportunities, niche promotion, and marketing activities for the district.

2. To deepen understanding of the Sweet Auburn corridor, the National Trust's Research & Development Department is proposing to undertake a Vacancy to Vitality study, research designed to comprehensively assess Sweet Auburn's historic built environment and to examine the community's economic potential. Research will focus upon vacancy rates, measure existing square footage and property density, while determining preservation-based redevelopment strategies designed to champion the preservation, rehabilitation, and reuse of Sweet Auburn's key properties.

Maintenance of any historic property, whether it be a single building or a large district, requires constant attention and active management. NPS will continue to monitor the Sweet Auburn NHL District and welcomes new information concerning the issues discussed in this memo. Furthermore, the NPS looks forward to assisting the local community and their preservation partners as they strive towards the common goal of protecting the unique qualities that make the Sweet Auburn NHL District a place of national importance.

Please contact Ellen Rankin, Archeological and Historic Preservation Partnerships Program at (404) 507-5791 if you have any questions or require additional information.