

The Historic 'Sweet Auburn' District of Atlanta



(c) Central Atlanta Progress

The History of “Sweet Auburn”

Sweet Auburn was the commercial, cultural, and spiritual center of African American life prior to the civil rights movement. Approximately two miles in length, Auburn Avenue had a concentration of black-owned businesses, entertainment venues, and churches that catered to the underserved black population. Although the district was comprised of mostly small businesses, several churches helped build and maintain heritage in the district.

Auburn Avenue was home to what historian Gary Pomerantz describes as Atlanta’s “three-legged stool of black finance.” Atlanta’s first black-owned office building was constructed in 1904 by businessman and politician Henry A. Rucker. In 1905, former slave Alonzo Herndon founded Atlanta Life Insurance. Herman Perry’s Standard Life Insurance soon followed, as well as Citizen’s Trust Bank, which extended credit to black homeowners and entrepreneurs underserved by the city’s white lending institutions.

Sweet Auburn was also the place to connect on social issues of the day, as well as the latest black entertainers and information for the black culture. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Odd Fellows, the Masons, National Urban League and the Top Hat Club (late the Royal Peacock) were anchors in the district. The bustling retail trade and wealthy businesses owners earned the street a national reputation for African American finance and entrepreneurial zeal. In 1956, *Fortune* described Auburn Avenue as [“the richest Negro street in the world.”](#)

Business Spotlight: Sweet Auburn Bread Company



Courtesy of Sweet Auburn Bread Co.

A classically trained chef, Sonya Jones created [Sweet Auburn Bread Company](#) with the goal of making classic southern baked goods from scratch. When Chef Sonya started the bakery in 1997, there was a growing attempt to revitalize the district that had seen disinvestment for many years. But as a native Atlantan, Chef Sonya was optimistic that the neighborhood's historic charm would eventually draw in more residents and tourists.

Chef Sonya was right. She famously served sweet potato cheesecake to President Bill Clinton in 1999, which she credits with changing people's perception of the neighborhood and garnering attention. Chef Sonya has received a lot of media attention for creating classic southern baked goods, which she has tried to turn that into positive publicity for the district. In 2009, CNN featured the bakery in a segment entitled "The Little Bakery That Could." She published a cookbook two years later ("[Sweet Auburn Desserts: Atlanta's 'Little Bakery That Could'](#)"), where she tried to promote the Sweet Auburn District to a new audience.

Chef Sonya says Sweet Auburn has stayed in business for over 20 years due to a loyal customer base, a good location, and sticking to their roots as a traditional southern bakery. On top of the retail location, Chef Sonya sells at farmers markets throughout the city all year and has taken advantage of the growing film industry in Atlanta by doing craft services for film crews and food styling for the many movies that have come to town.

According to Sweet Auburn Works' Executive Director Lejuano Varnell, "We literally wouldn't be the same neighborhood without Chef Sonya." Today, Sweet Auburn has seen increased development, with new bars and restaurants popping up, although there are still some vacancies. The historic neighborhood now has a streetcar and is a popular spot for tourists, with millions of travelers visiting the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site each year.

UrbanMain has been working with [Sweet Auburn Works](#) and [Georgia Main Street](#) in the Sweet Auburn district.