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LIFE ON THE ROAD**

**CELEBRATING 200 YEARS!
FIRST BAPTIST JONESBORO**

**LATTO: STILL CLAYTON
SOUTHERN ROOTS**

we are ClaytonTM

**LIVES SHAPED
BY LAND:
CLAYTON COUNTY
THROUGH TIME**

*A Lifelong
Love Affair*

**Barbara Casey Lane is Passionate
about Growing Her Community**





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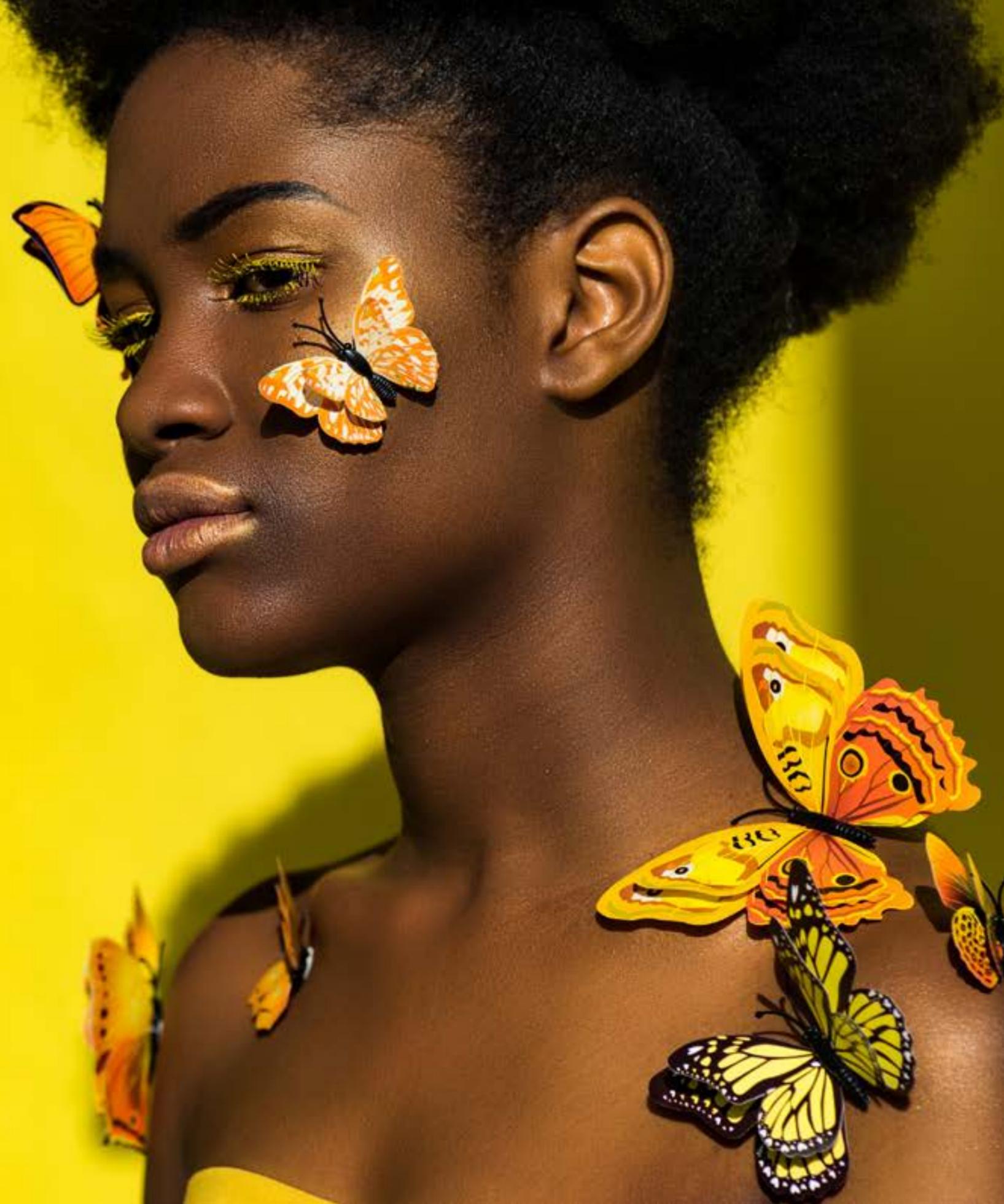
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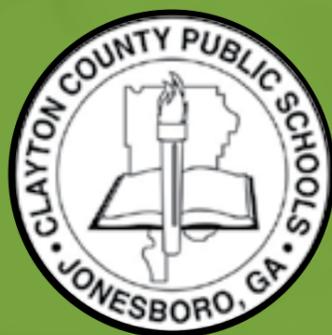
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FEATURES

VOLUME XV NUMBER 2.01

SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2025



61

*Justice, Community, and the
Human Side of Law*

68

*Lives Shaped by Land:
Clayton County through Time*

75

*A Lifelong Love Affair with
Clayton County: Barbara
Casey Lane is Passionate About
Growing Her Community*

DEPARTMENTS

SEPTEMBER - NOVEMBER 2025



ART & CULTURE

17

ART SCENE

Murals that Speak: How Public Art Tells the Story of Clayton County

19

BOOK NOOK

Speaking Truth from the Rafts, Percival Everett's James

22

ART & LOVE

Dale Jones & Jodi White Love, Laughter, and Life on the Road

26

MUSIC

Latto: Still Clayton, Always Global

ROOTED & RESPECTED

31

CIVIC HONOR

Bridging Continents: Rep. Rhonda Burnough on Culture

34

LIVING LEGEND

An Educated Life, Pam Adamson

36

FICTION

The War that Never Ended, A Letter from the Red Clay, No One Won Here

38

HISTORY

Celebrating 200 Years! Building a Legacy at First Baptist Jonesboro



IN EVERY ISSUE

- 12 Publisher's Note
- 14 Contributors
- 15 Hey Y'all
- 91 Out & About
- 99 The Last Line



BUSINESS & INNOVATION

45

BUSINESS

Rooted in Business: Growing Opportunities

49

TECHNOLOGY

Clayton County Public Schools and the Future of Technology: A Regional Perspective

52

INNOVATION

A New Stage for Clayton: The Convocation Center

54

MADE IN CLAYTON

TOTO USA: Global Innovation with Deep Roots in Clayton County

57

CTRL+ALT+DEL

AI: Your Frenemy in the Inbox

58

LEADERSHIP

Rooted in Courage: The Quiet Moment that Shaped My Leadership By Valencia Williamson

TABLE TALK

81

LIVING IN CLAYTON

From Web Pages to Front Porches: How Santia Fox Built a Life of Design

84

RECIPE ROOM

Dish & Dialogue: Where Stories and Recipes are Shared

89

STORYTIME

The Warren House: Haunted History on Mimosa Drive

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Barbara Casey Lane
CEO and Chairman of the Board

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FOUNDED	1947
EMPLOYEES	140
NEW HQ	2018



WE ARE ROOTED

“Our roots run together—steady, shared, and alive with the stories we refuse to let fade.”

This relaunch—rebirth issue is a reckoning with what's been buried, a return to what still breathes beneath the surface.



There was a time I believed this magazine might not rise again—left under layers of burnout, disappointment, and voices (some mine) that mistook pause for failure.

But something endured.

Not untouched.
But unbroken.
Steady. Ancient. Quiet.

Roots.

The kind that hold memory like marrow.
That grow without applause.
That stretch deeper just as everything above ground starts to fall away.

And here's the truth: those roots are not mine alone. They are shared. Woven from neighbors who show up without being asked, elders whose wisdom steadies the ground, and the everyday kindnesses that travel farther than we ever see. This magazine was carried through its hardest seasons not by me alone—but by a community that refuses to let its stories disappear.

As autumn takes hold—September's routines, October's thinning light, November's long exhale—I find myself needing something honest. Not glossy. Not performative. Just... true.

This issue is titled *We Are Rooted* because I had to remember what lives underneath the pressure. Before the striving. Before the story was shaped by shame. Before the leaves fell.

Rooted doesn't mean stuck. It means nourished by struggle—but not defined by it. It means becoming more yourself, not less, as the seasons shift. It means honoring the legacy in the soil while imagining something new. It means knowing that we belong to each other, and that what grows here grows because we tend it—TOGETHER.

Inside these pages, you'll find stories that stretch across all three months—
From September's call to begin again,
To October's quiet magic and transformation,
To November's invitation to remember, reflect, and give thanks.

This is no longer just a magazine.
It's a marker in time. A mirror.
A map back to what matters.
And—most importantly—it's proof of what can endure when a community decides to keep its own story alive.

I'm grateful you're holding it—rooted in your own truth, your own rhythm, your own becoming. And I'm grateful we're still here, still growing, still telling each other the stories that keep us. ✖

With steadiness,

Gerrian Hawes
Founder, Publisher & Editor-in-Chief

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Empowerment through storytelling.
Rebirth through authenticity.

I am Gerrian—your guide back to the version of you that's always been there, waiting to be heard.

This is a space for women in midlife who are navigating change with clarity instead of performance. Through storytelling, astrology, and identity strategy, iamgerrian.com offers tools to help you reframe your voice, your visibility, and your next version.

Inside, you'll find essays that go deep—into menopause, authenticity, grief, and reinvention—alongside language systems and frameworks that make self-definition not only possible, but lasting.

This isn't branding for show.
It's structure for truth.
It's a return.

I Am Gerrian. And so are you.



Contributors

Behind every issue of We Are Clayton Magazine is a community of voices, images, and ideas that bring these pages to life. From longtime friends who have been with us since the very first prototype to the next generation of creators stepping into their own, each contributor adds a piece of themselves to the story we're telling together.

This page is our way of saying thank you—to the writers, photographers, and partners whose dedication shapes not just a magazine, but a living record of Clayton County's spirit.

STUDENT WRITERS
Maddy Hutchinson
Justin Carmichael
Sabrina Gilmore
Melissa Calamore
Amanda White



Michael Booth, Senior Writer
A proud Jonesboro resident and longtime friend of *We Are Clayton Magazine*, Michael Booth has been part of our story since the very beginning—nearly 15 years ago. As both a writer and supporter, his presence has helped shape the voice of WACM, carrying forward the mission of keeping Clayton County's stories alive.



Richard A. Evans, Creative Director
A true friend of *We Are Clayton Magazine*, Richard A. Evans has been connected to our journey from the very start—he even saw the prototype of our first issue. Through his photography, Richard has helped define the look and feel of WACM, capturing images that reflect both the spirit and the soul of our community.



Ameera Thomas & Charles "Charlemagne" Crawford
Ameera Thomas and Charles "Charlemagne" Smith represent the next generation of content creators—bold voices and fresh perspectives who bring energy, creativity, and a new lens to the stories of Clayton County. Their contributions remind us that the future of WACM is rooted in honoring our legacy while nurturing the storytellers who will carry it forward.



Ja'Don Hawes
The youngest son of the publisher and founder of *We Are Clayton Magazine*, Ja'Don Hawes represents the next generation of business leadership within South Atlanta Media. As both a photographer and Vice President of Sales, he blends creativity with strategy, ensuring WACM not only tells powerful stories but also sustains the business that carries those stories forward.

Hey Y'all

This is your space to talk back. Share how *We Are Clayton Magazine* makes you think, laugh, or feel—and let your note become part of the conversation we're building together. Email notes to hey_yall@weareclayton.com.

Dear Editor,
I'm grateful for how inclusive your coverage is—from youth and seniors to business leaders and artists. Stories that bridge neighborhoods and backgrounds truly elevate us. In future issues, could you amplify voices from grassroots organizers, faith groups, or local nonprofits? Spotlights on volunteer-driven changemakers or language access advocates could add rich texture—and inspire others to engage.
— Reverend Paula H., Lovejoy

Your stories beautifully celebrate Clayton, but I'd love to see more interactive content—reader events, live Q&As with featured subjects, or invitations to tours tied to the stories. For instance, after a story about an art colony, link to public gallery hours. Or host a virtual chat with a business owner profiled. This engagement would turn passive reading into real community action.
— Nkem E., Forest Park

Dear Editor,
I was truly moved by the story of Harvest Village forming an art colony here in Clayton County. The idea that art can build bridges across communities and ages stirred something powerful. I would love to see future stories spotlight residents who've participated—testimonials, photos, even a "student of the week." Including behind-the-scenes looks at the creative process—murals in progress, workshops in action—would further bring this initiative alive. Also, could the magazine include upcoming class schedules or volunteer options in each issue? Art is community-building—let's keep growing together!
— Jordan M., Lovejoy

Your feature on Clayton's music scene was electric — such a vibrant celebration of local voices. I especially appreciated the spotlight on emerging artists reflecting our community's rhythms.

In future pieces, I'd love to see more storytelling on how music intersects with culture and identity here—perhaps video mini-profiles or curated playlists featuring new tracks. Maybe a section for live show listings, open mic nights, and how locals can support grassroots venues. Music lives in person—let's help people find the beat of Clayton County.
— Sasha L., Riverdale

Dear We Are Clayton Team,
Your cover story about the new Art Colony in Jonesboro was inspiring. Seeing how creative spaces are taking root shows promise for local economic and social growth. I hope future issues revisit this as the colony evolves—profile resident artists, feature public exhibitions, highlight ways the broader community can engage or even contribute. Also, I'd love an editorial on the logistics: how was funding secured, how was the space chosen, and what are expansion plans? These details could encourage others to replicate such efforts across Clayton County.
— Marion T., Jonesboro

Dear Editor,
Your Rooted & Respected segment on the website unearths stories of local legacy—oral histories, archival images, memorable moments. I'd love to see this expanded: perhaps a reader-submitted memory section where elders share a photo and a short story, a rotating historic map tracing how neighborhoods evolved over decades, or interactive digital extras. These stories don't just inform—they connect us across generations. Thank you for giving voice to Clayton's history.
— Ethel C., Morrow

To the Editor,
Reading about Donya Sartor—the first Black woman to run for mayor of Jonesboro—was so powerful. Her journey from Emory grad to community leader captured hope and grit. I'd love follow-up stories exploring what she's currently working on or any local leaders similarly making history across Clayton County. A broader "Clayton Women in Leadership" series shining light on activists, educators, entrepreneurs, and civic changemakers could inspire young girls and amplify their voices. Please keep highlighting these trailblazers.
— Latoya B., Ellenwood

We Asked, Y'all Answered

Quick Question...
Describe Clayton County in five words...



"Rich culture, strong community roots."
— Danielle J., Riverdale

"Authentic people, soulful Southern pride."
— Tyrone M., Jonesboro

"History, heart, hustle, and hope."
— Linda C., Stockbridge

"Family feels like home here."
— Marcus R., Fayetteville

"Food, faith, music, and love."
— Auntie Cheryl, Forest Park

"Neighbors who actually show up."
— Devon S., Morrow

"Creative energy in every CITY."
— Imani K., College Park

"Everything I need is here."
— Greg H., Lovejoy

"Tradition meets tomorrow, right here."
— Isaiah F., Hampton

Community, Culture, Diversity, Lee Street
— Melissa K., Clayton County



@weareclaytonmagazine

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ART THAT MOVES US, CULTURE THAT SHAPES US

ART & CULTURE



Photos By Gerrian Hawes

Murals that Speak:

How Public Art Tells the Story of Clayton County and Atlanta's Southside

By Carla Lovett

ART SCENE



“
There’s a quiet radicalism in putting a mural on a wall and saying: This is who we are. To make beauty public. To preserve memory out loud. To offer a moment of reflection, pride, or curiosity to anyone who walks by.

In the heart of downtown Jonesboro, Georgia, a wall tells a story few textbooks ever dared to write. One mural features Jesse Fuller, a blues legend and one-man band who left a mark on American music. Another, a bold portrait of Scarlett O’Hara, nods to Clayton County’s complicated relationship with Gone with the Wind. These aren’t just pretty pictures—they’re memory made visible. These walls speak. And in Clayton County, they speak loudest when no one else is listening.

Across Atlanta’s Southside, public art and community murals have become powerful tools for storytelling, preservation, and transformation. Especially in Clayton County, where murals serve not just as beautification projects but as living archives, cultural mirrors, and symbols of local pride. They tell the stories that often go unheard.

A New Landmark in Lovejoy

That tradition expanded this summer with the unveiling of Nature’s Revival, a breathtaking mural mosaic at Bobby Cartwright Park in Lovejoy. Created as part of the Global Roots / America Connects initiative by Canadian artist Lewis Lavoie, the project involved hundreds of contributors—from seasoned painters to schoolchildren—each designing a single tile that would join hundreds of others to form a cohesive image.

The result: a vibrant landscape of foliage and earthy tones, chosen to reflect themes of growth, rebirth, and environmental beauty. “This awe-inspiring mosaic artwork is a collaboration of artists of all skill levels,” the City of Lovejoy shared in its official announcement. “It reflects the creative heartbeat of our city.”

Now a permanent fixture in the park, Nature’s Revival joins a growing network of public artworks across the county that invite residents and visitors to see themselves in the landscape—literally.

Murals in a Global Tradition

The use of murals as public storytelling spans back over 30,000 years. From Paleolithic cave paintings in France and Spain to Egyptian tombs, Minoan frescoes, and Roman wall art, murals have recorded human beliefs, fears, and aspirations for millennia. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, they became teaching tools and theological spectacles—none more famous than Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel.

In the 20th century, murals turned revolutionary. Mexico’s muralist movement, led by Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, made public walls political. In the U.S., New Deal artists under the WPA created murals celebrating American workers and everyday life. Later, Civil Rights murals and Chicano art transformed city walls into platforms for protest and pride.

Clayton County’s murals stand in that tradition but speak in a voice all their own.

Everyday Art, Everyday Life

Unlike art confined behind museum glass, Clayton’s murals are woven into daily life. Residents pass them on their way to school, work, and church. They live in plain sight—accessible, emotional, unfiltered. To those who live here, they are reminders of presence, pride, and persistence.

One example: the upcoming MARTA Transit Center mural near the Clayton County Justice Center. Rather than outsourcing the project, MARTA’s Artbound program is inviting local residents to stencil and paint, ensuring the finished work reflects the community’s voice—not just a single artist’s vision.

The Power of Paint

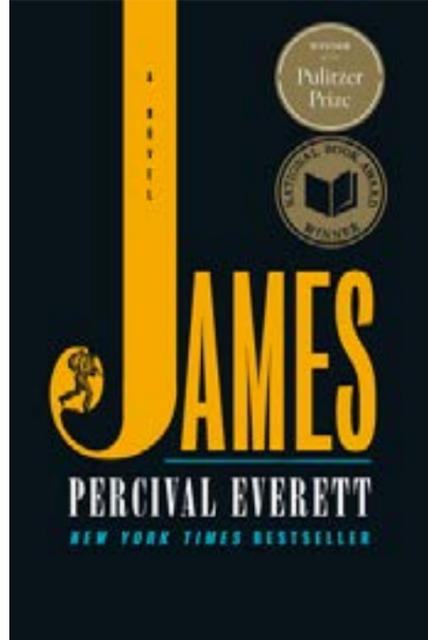
Whether a high-profile installation like Nature’s Revival or a grassroots neighborhood wall, murals in Clayton County push back against narratives that have erased or overlooked Southside communities. They insist that culture is not confined to Midtown galleries or upscale developments—it is alive and pulsing wherever people choose to claim their space.

In Clayton, murals reclaim that space. They say, “We were here. We are still here.” That message matters in a region often underestimated and misrepresented.

Sometimes the most powerful way to honor the past and shape the future isn’t a policy—it’s a paintbrush. And in Clayton County, the present is not just happening—it’s looking boldly back. ✖



“Nature’s Revival, a community-created Mural Mosaic at Bobby Cartwright Park in Lovejoy, GA, combines hundreds of individually painted tiles into one vibrant image of growth and renewal—celebrating art, unity, and the city’s creative heartbeat.”



BOOKS

Speaking Truth from the Raft:

Percival Everett's
James
Rewrites an
American Classic

By Carla Lovett

Percival Everett's *James* is a masterful act of literary reclamation. Reimagining Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* from the point of view of Jim—the enslaved man relegated to a supporting role in the original—Everett gives his narrator not only a voice but an inner life rich with intellect, wit, and defiance.

Told in the first person, *James* follows its protagonist's escape from enslavement and

his determined quest to reunite with his wife and daughter. The premise suggests a familiar journey narrative, but Everett reshapes it into something far more layered. James is a man who plays the part expected of him—speaking in the dialect white people assume is natural—while privately wielding eloquent, precise language. His performance of ignorance is a survival tactic, and Everett uses it to explore the complexity of identity under oppression.

Along the way, James navigates dangers both physical and psychological. He hides in plain sight, joins a minstrel troupe in a grotesque masquerade of racial performance, and survives by turning humor into armor. Everett balances moments of absurdity with gut-punching truth, showing how systems of power demand theater from those they subjugate.

The novel also brims with philosophical undercurrents. In surreal dream sequences, James converses with thinkers like Voltaire and Locke, as if wrestling in real time with the intellectual contradictions of a society that claims to value liberty while trafficking in human lives. These scenes deepen the book's meditation on knowledge as a form of resistance.

Critics have hailed *James* as both thrilling and soulful. The *New York Times* praised its humanity, while *Kirkus Reviews* called it “worthy of one of the noblest characters in American literature.” It's also been recognized with major honors, including the 2024 National Book Award and the 2025 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction.

Everett's prose is precise yet expansive, alternating between tense, tightly wound action and reflective passages that examine the nature of freedom. James writes his own story in a stolen journal—a quiet but radical act of taking ownership over his life and narrative. In doing so, Everett reframes a piece of the American literary canon, challenging readers to see how stories are shaped by who is allowed to tell them.

At under 300 pages, *James* manages to be an adventure, a satire, a historical reckoning, and a deeply human portrait. It's a novel that will move you, make you laugh, unsettle you, and—most importantly—change the way you think about a character you thought you knew.

For readers seeking fiction that marries urgency with artistry, *James* is not just a retelling. It's a revelation. ✖



James Heads to the BIG Screen

Universal Pictures has acquired the film rights to *James*, Percival Everett's Pulitzer Prize- and National Book Award-winning reimagining of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Steven Spielberg's Amblin Partners will produce, with Everett adapting his own novel for the screen and serving as executive producer.

The story shifts the focus from Huck to Jim, revealing him as an eloquent, strategic man forced to “play the part” expected of him while secretly using intelligence and literacy to navigate the dangers of slavery.

Early talks suggest Taika Waititi may direct, bringing his signature mix of humor and emotional weight. The adaptation will follow James's perilous escape, his fight to reunite with his family, and his encounters with both the absurd theater and harsh realities of the antebellum South.

With heavyweight talent behind the project and Everett's direct creative control, the *James* film promises to be as challenging, insightful, and moving as the book itself—set to redefine a beloved classic for modern audiences.

South Carolina *Coastal Vacation*



DISCOVER *South Carolina*

Myrtle Beach is packed with family-friendly resorts that will help make your vacation easy, fun and (hopefully) stress-free. From indoor water parks to beachfront access and on-site arcades, here are a few top picks that both kids and parents will love.

Located on the quieter northern end of Myrtle Beach, Dunes Village Resort is one of the most popular family resorts in the area—and for good reason. It's home to the largest indoor water park in any Myrtle Beach resort, spanning 30,000 square feet. The property also offers direct beach access, multiple pools, kid-friendly activities and spacious suites with full kitchens.



DiscoverSouthCarolina.com

ART AND LOVE

Dale Jones &
Jodi White

Love, Laughter, and Life on the Road

By Gerrian Hawes

Comedy power couple Jodi White and Dale Jones share their journey from the stand-up stage to running a thriving business in Georgia, blending marriage, humor, and creativity into a life worth laughing about.

Power Couple of Punchlines – Serving laughs, love, and life on stage together.

In the world of stand-up, there's nothing more powerful than timing—except maybe the chemistry between two comics who share the stage, the home, and the hustle. For nearly two decades, Jodi White and Dale Jones have been making audiences double over in laughter while building a life that's equal parts punchlines, road miles, and creative ventures.

Comedy

Jodi didn't start her comedy career until 38, but the moment she first stepped on stage, she knew she'd found her calling. "That first night was such a rush," she says. "I thought, THIS is what I want to be when I grow up." Her early gigs brought both the thrill of success and the sting of failure. "Two weeks after a great show, I died on stage. That's when I learned this wasn't going to be easy—it was going to take work."

The work came in the form of cross-country drives in beat-up cars, sleeping at rest areas, and surviving on dollar-menu burgers. "It was a rite of passage," she says. "I was a road dog." Over the years, she's performed everywhere from cruise ships to corporate gigs, now limiting herself to the shows she wants to do while also running a successful T-shirt company.

For Dale Jones, comedy started at 22 during an open mic at Zanies Comedy Club in Nashville. A flubbed line ("Well, I f#\$%ed that up") earned unexpected laughs and set him on a path that's

now spanned over 30 years. Known for his machine-gun delivery, animated expressions, and physical antics, Dale trained at the Second City Improv School and went on to win multiple comedy festivals, appear on *Last Comic Standing*, *The Very Funny Show* on TBS, *Stand Up Live Nashville*, and even the film *Out of Time* with Denzel Washington.

His comedy album *I'm Not Well* hit the top three on iTunes and Amazon, and his YouTube specials—*I Have a Prescription Vol. 1 & 2* and *Escape From Nashville*—showcase his manic, high-energy style.

The Couple Act

Being married to another comedian comes with perks and pitfalls. "The best part is knowing this life," Jodi says. "The high of being on stage, the agony of a bad night—you really get each other. The worst part is being apart so much. I miss my best friend."

Their marriage is a comedy goldmine. "Nothing is sacred," Jodi laughs. "Every argument, every quirk—it's all open season." While Dale excels at punchlines, Jodi builds the setups that make them land. "We're very different on stage. He's physical and goofy; I'm very real."

Despite the shared profession, life at home isn't all bits and banter. "When we're not working, we're off work," Jodi says. "We bicker, we fight, we love hard. Missing each other makes us appreciate the time we have."

Creative Ventures Beyond the Stage

When the pandemic shut down live comedy, the couple leaned into a side hustle they'd been running for years: printing shirts for fans. That hobby became **Comedy Couple Tees**, a thriving Jonesboro, Georgia-based business offering screen printing, embroidery, and custom apparel for everyone from comedians to schools to family reunions.

"It's just like comedy," Jodi says. "We take something blank and turn it into something that brings people joy." Their Etsy shop and online store ship nationally, and the business has become a cornerstone of their creative life.

They also produce a YouTube series called "*We're the Joneses*"—a weekly, 15-minute snapshot of their life as a comedy couple. The series

“

When we're not working, we're off work—like most couples—we bicker, we fight, we love hard. Missing each other makes us appreciate the time we have.

”



Comedy power couple Dale Jones and Jodi White at home in Jonesboro, GA—where love, laughter, and creativity are always center stage.

blends behind-the-scenes road stories, DIY projects, and honest conversations about marriage, work, and chasing creative dreams.

TikTok & Social Connection

While Jodi never planned to become a TikTok creator, the platform found her when a fan reposted one of her Facebook videos to viral success. She began posting her own content—everything from wearing a Cinderella gown to her son's wedding to accidentally touching an electric fence. Some clips soar, some flop, but she posts with one goal: to make people smile.

Her followers especially love videos featuring Dale. "People want to believe in love," she says. "They like seeing couples who laugh together, go through hard times together, and still choose each other every day."

Southern Roots, Southern Humor

Both Jodi and Dale lean into their Southern backgrounds in their material. Jodi grew up in Florida but claims full Southern status thanks to childhood memories of airboat rides on Lake Okeechobee and vacations in the Everglades. She plays with Southern stereotypes—marrying young, raising "a bunch of youngins," and being blissfully naive.

Their home club is the Atlanta Punchline, a rare local stop in a career that often keeps them performing in other states. "It's always good to come back home," Jodi says.

Advice for Aspiring Comics

For new comedians, Jodi's advice is blunt: "Get on stage 1,000 times. You can't learn comedy in a classroom—you have to do it, over and over." Dale agrees, adding that persistence is key: "You'll get told you're not funny. Keep going anyway."

Their own definitions of success have evolved. "I used to think it meant being famous," Jodi says. "Now, it's about being able to support myself telling jokes, traveling, and making people laugh." For Dale, the thrill remains in the work itself: "After all these years, I still can't believe I get paid to do this."

The Legacy They're Building

Between their touring schedules, YouTube series, TikTok presence, and apparel business, Jodi and Dale have crafted a creative life that's flexible, resilient, and uniquely theirs. They've weathered industry changes, personal challenges, and the unpredictability of show business—not by sticking to a script, but by writing their own.

"We're far from rich," Jodi says. "But I think I live a pretty charmed life. I get to do what I love, make people laugh, create things that bring joy—and I get to do it all with my best friend. For that, I'm so very grateful." ❀

WE'RE AN ENTIRELY
DIFFERENT TYPE OF
SOUTHERN.

LOUISVILLE
EST. 1778



MUSIC

Latto:

Still Clayton, Always Global
Southern Roots. Worldwide Reach.

By Jennifer Arlington



Photos IG: @latto

Before the Grammy nods, platinum plaques, and chart-topping hits, Latto was Alyssa Michelle Stephens—a sharp-tongued teenager walking the halls of Lovejoy High School in Clayton County.

There was no overnight glow-up. No viral gimmick. No handout.

What built Latto's name was grind—bars that cut, a pen game honed razor-sharp, and the courage to keep evolving, even when the spotlight burned hot. She entered the industry loud, performing under the name Miss Mulatto—a title that sparked debate but never outshined her talent. From the very beginning, she was navigating more than music. She was confronting identity, industry pressure, and the weight of Southern expectations with a mic in one hand and fire in the other.

From the Southside to The Rap Game

Her rise began on *The Rap Game*, the reality competition show produced by Jermaine Dupri and Queen Latifah, where teen contestants vied for a record deal. Latto, then Miss Mulatto, won the show's first season in 2016 at just 16 years old. But instead of taking the offered contract, she made a bold move—turning it down and betting on herself to go further on her own terms. That gamble paid off. It marked her as more than a TV competition winner—it made her a serious contender in Atlanta's underground rap scene and set her on the path to the main stage.

Big Energy. Bigger Purpose.

In 2021, she released “Big Energy,” a track that became

From Top Left: Latto steps up to the mic at Power 106's LA Leakers, delivering bars with the confidence of a champion.

Serving a look as fresh as Wimbledon's center court—Chanel legs, pink tennis dreams, and a perfect match of style and sport.

a breakout moment and solidified her place in the mainstream. It was more than a hit—it was a cultural marker that pushed her from local recognition to national prominence.

She wasn't just the girl from Lovejoy High anymore—she was an artist with global reach. But at home, people still saw the same Latto.

Her sound? Southern to the core.

Her style? Confident, polished, and never watered down.

While others chased high-profile co-signs or viral controversy, Latto built her career the traditional way—by showing up prepared, staying consistent, and out-rapping most of the room. And when she won, she didn't forget where she came from. Through her Win Some Give Some Foundation, launched in 2021, she's created opportunities for young women—especially those from neighborhoods like hers—offering mentorship, scholarships, and empowerment programs.

The Name Change: Growth in Real Time

As her career grew, so did the conversation about her stage name. “Mulatto” is a term with a painful history—rooted in slavery and colonialism—that has long been used to label and diminish people of mixed race. While she originally chose it with the intention of reclaiming it, the public conversation made it clear: for many, it carried deep wounds.

In 2021, she publicly dropped the name and reintroduced herself as Latto. It was more than rebranding—it was a choice to evolve, to listen, and to lead with her music instead of controversy. Her first major single under the new name, “Big Energy,” went on to become

her biggest hit to date.

Latto didn't just change her name—she leveled up. Still Southern. Still Clayton. Still determined to claim everything she was told she couldn't have.

A Standout in Today's Female Rap Scene

Today, Latto is named among the top women in rap, but her style sets her apart. Her music is rooted in Atlanta trap traditions and Southern swagger, blending commercial appeal with sharp lyricism. She's equally at home on a pop-driven hook as she is delivering a hard-hitting freestyle.

Her album *777* put her range on full display—balancing club-ready anthems with introspective tracks that expanded her story. Though she's collaborated with some of the biggest names in hip-hop, she's maintained her independence in building a loyal fanbase and respected reputation. Her lyrics embrace confidence and sex-positivity, but never at the cost of substance.

Controversy and Cultural Commentary

Latto hasn't avoided controversy—and sometimes, she's stepped directly into it. But whether navigating debates about her name, addressing criticism of her image, or speaking up on industry double standards, she's done so on her own terms. That mix of talent, tenacity, and self-awareness has kept her not just relevant, but resonant. ✖

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AMEERA THOMAS

lens, even forgotten places breathe. Four silent pumps stand like monuments to another time, bathed in the glow of a fading sun.



WHERE ROOTS GIVE RISE TO RESPECT

ROOTED & RESPECTED



Warm rhythms greet weary travelers — a vibrant Senegalese welcome with music, color, and tradition right at the hotel door **TL** Silent clay figures bear witness to a painful truth — the chains of slavery remembered inside Senegal's Museum of Black Civilizations **TR** Powerful tradition on the sands of Senegal — a masked dancer electrifies the crowd with color, rhythm, and ancestral spirit.

Photos Courtesy of Rep. Rhonda Burnough



Bridging Continents:

Rep. Rhonda Burnough on Culture, Connection, and Community Change

By Michael Booth

CIVIL HONOR



Photo By Richard A. Evans

Rep. Rhonda Burnough proudly takes her seat on the House floor, representing District 77 with dedication and leadership.

It takes a journey of more than four thousand miles to change your outlook on life—at least it did for State Representative Rhonda Burnough, who recently traveled to Yene in Senegal, the sister city to Forest Park.

She was with an HBCU Green Fund visit to the West African nation that included Forest Park Mayor Angelynne Butler and Palmetto Mayor Teresa Thomas-Smith. The tour struck an emotional chord with the group when they traveled to Gorée Island’s House of Slaves and the Door of No Return, a solemn memorial to the victims of the transatlantic slave trade.

“You put your foot into the Atlantic and think, you are an ocean away ...” Burnough said, her words lingering in the air. “It changed my values on life. What you

thought was important is not. You have a better understanding of life by going to another country.”

After a greeting with traditional drummers and dancers, the entire 22-person visiting delegation was presented with—and changed into—Senegalese clothing. The nine-day event included tours of the Museum of Black Civilizations, the West African Research Center, an ecological facility, Cheikh Anta Diop University, health clinics, the HBCU Green Fund English & STEM Education Center, local schools, and La Ferme des 4 Chemins (the 4 Paths Farm), a women-led farm.

“It was so amazing to me how they welcomed us into their homes. Women were growing vegetables on a small patch of ground to feed their families,” Burnough said. “We got to interact with about 20 women. They thought enough of us to be a part of their culture.”

When the group walked into Yene Mayor Massamba Mbengue’s office, the first thing they saw was a photo of the mayor in Forest Park on his trip here for a Sister City visit. Their talks turned up an interesting connection between Senegal—and much of West Africa—and the United States.

“What I learned on this visit is that the American Civil Rights Movement influenced their fight for freedom,” she said.

The HBCU Green Fund was founded by Felicia Davis to promote and advance environmental sustainability at HBCUs and their surrounding communities. The Green Fund invests in students with training, mentorship, and hands-on experience in renewable energy, urban agriculture, and sustainable transit. The visit to Senegal was an economic development trade mission to strengthen commercial, cultural, and humanitarian ties with the West African region.

The District 77 state representative returned from her trip to face the reality of the sometimes-contentious Georgia House of Representatives, although she said the political battles are not as intense.

“The legislature ebbs and flows,” Burnough said. “Eighty-five percent of the bills are bipartisan. It only becomes a problem when a bill has something personal for a sponsor.”

Burnough admits that the dynamics of the House have changed since the death of Speaker David Ralston, who she said was a moderate in many ways. “He understood the big picture. His replacement, Jon Burns, is more of a party person.” The Democrats, in the minority, have scrambled to put their agenda forward under the Republican majority. They recently elected Carolyn Hugley from Columbus as their Minority Leader.

“Carolyn Hugley has really brought us together as a party,” said Burnough.

Some of the bipartisan legislation is aimed at improving the literacy of Georgia’s school students—efforts that are close to the heart of the former school administrator. The

legislature has considered these educational bills this session: The Georgia Early Literacy Act, Georgia’s K-12 English Language Arts Standards, and Georgia’s dyslexia efforts. (As of this writing, these bills have not been voted on by the full legislature.)

“These programs are a step in the right direction. It takes more than just one program to help students read better. These efforts mean Clayton County is not at the bottom anymore,” she said.

One of the bills she is sponsoring revises and updates the ethics code for the Clayton County Board of Commissioners and creates comprehensive guidelines for ethical conduct by county officials. The legislation calls for the creation of a new Board of Ethics with eight citizens appointed by the Grand Jury and the tax commissioner. Board participants cannot have had recent political or county employment.

“Members of the community brought it to us. They felt like the commissioners were in charge of themselves,” she said.

If passed, the bill would give the board budgetary independence and the authority to conduct investigations into potential ethical violations. Headed by a new Ethics Officer and Ethics Administrator, these individuals would support the board’s work, with responsibilities including education, complaint handling, and reporting potential violations.

The bill defines numerous ethical standards, including prohibitions on using public office for private gain, accepting inappropriate gifts, disclosing confidential information, and participating in matters where the official has a conflict of interest.

(As of this writing, the bill has not been voted on by the House.)

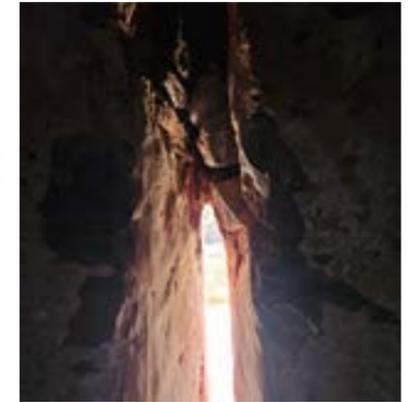
While she may represent District 77, as a state legislator Burnough has to act on legislation from around the state.

“I’ve learned a lot about the state of Georgia because of the laws affecting different parts of the state,” she said. “It has been very rewarding. It is amazing the things you come across.”

Burnough recently passed two milestones: She turned 70, and she celebrated her 50th year as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. The State honored her half-century membership with a House Resolution, LC 112 2651, on January 13, 2025. This resolution recognizes her dedication to sisterhood, scholarship, and service, as well as her commitment to the people of Georgia.

As she was being interviewed at a local restaurant, Burnough suddenly jumped from her chair to hug a woman at a nearby table—it was one of her sorority sisters.

“It has been wonderful for me in so many ways,” she said, her sorority sister smiling and hugging back. “As you see, you always have friends.” ✨



It changed my values on life. What you thought was important is not. You have a better understanding of life by going to another country.



TL “From darkness to the sea — the final passage where countless lives were stolen into the unknown, remembered on the shores of Senegal.” TR “Through the smallest cracks, light still finds its way — a symbol of survival and hope inside the walls of Gorée Island.” Middle On the road in Senegal 2025 — the Sister to Sister journey carried not just names on a shirt, but stories, bonds, and purpose across the miles. B Rep. Rhonda Burrough visits a classroom in Senegal, sharing smiles, stories, and encouragement with the next generation of leaders.

LIVING LEGEND



An Educated Life, Pam Adamson spent her career dedicated to the students of Clayton County

By Michael Booth

Teaching was always her calling. From the time Adamson graduated from Middle Tennessee State and took a job as a math teacher at the junior high in her small farming community to her tenure as chairperson of the Clayton County School Board, Adamson was drawn to the evolving minds of her young students.

“The kids are what got me here,” she said, reflecting on her half-century of working with students. “It’s a calling. I spent 18 years teaching before I took the job as an instructional teacher for a year. I wanted to go

back to being the math coordinator.”

As an instructional teacher, she worked with teachers and developed curricula, not with students. She missed the interaction and closeness she had with many of her pupils. Throughout her years teaching, Adamson formed numerous personal connections with her students.

Two particular students still have a place in her heart. One was a shy young girl who, not long before graduation, told Adamson about the man she was going to marry. He was much older than the girl, and she even brought him to meet her favorite teacher. Adamson tried to dissuade her from marrying him, but to no avail.

“They are still married today,” Adamson said, smiling.

The other student she remembers fondly was a young man who struggled in her class. She spent time outside of regular class hours helping him better understand math. He responded well and gradually grasped the concepts. Adamson was proud of what he accomplished. He told her he was going to become a Marine.

“He died in a car accident before he was able to join the Marines,” Adamson said.

Her husband, born and raised in Clayton County, brought her here in 1969, and she was promptly hired at North Clayton Junior High. She was very happy for the next 18 years before taking an outside-classroom job as an instructional teacher. Although she returned to the classroom, Adamson soon took on the role of teaching teachers.

“I would teach classes for teachers in math. They were thrilled with the classes. Many of them told me, ‘This is how I’m supposed to be teaching,’” she said.

Adamson used analytics—before the term was widely used—as a way to improve her teaching. She collected data from tests and papers to guide her class planning. To further her expertise, Adamson earned a master’s degree in mathematics, along with an add-on major and specialist degrees in Educational Leadership from Georgia State University.

She taught “hands-on equations,” a math course for teachers, for a company that sponsored such classes nationwide. Later, she shifted her expertise to helping schools seeking accreditation or accreditation renewal with the company AdvancED, where she became a team lead. Although she taught around the country, she missed her Clay-

“

The kids are what got me here, and it is the kids that kept me here.

”

ton County home.

She returned to serve four years as the school system’s Assistant Superintendent before the system lost accreditation. Adamson was appalled at the 2008 SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools) ruling, which stated, among other things, that the Clayton County School Board was dysfunctional, had abused power, and failed to enforce ethics. As a result, about 4,000 students left the system, and the loss of accreditation made it harder for the county to attract new businesses.

“My husband told me that my experience was needed and that I should run for the school board,” she said.

In 2010, Adamson ran for the District 1 school board seat and won unopposed. Two years later, she was elected Chair by the board and served in that position for the remainder of her six years. In the partisan 2014 election, Adamson won with 98.9% of the vote. But the election process was changed to nonpartisan for the 2018 election, and Adamson lost in the primary, polling around 35% of the vote.

Adamson believes politics ruin the education system because those who run don’t necessarily have the children’s best interests at heart.

“Some people don’t care about the kids,” she said, without naming names.

She later became the math coordinator for the state of Georgia, a position she said was rife with politics. “It was a nightmare,” she explained.

So she returned to the profession she loves: teaching. Adamson spent the last four years of her career teaching at Mt. Zion Christian School. Upon retirement, becoming, in her words, “a senior nobody,” she now fills her days feeding a pack of feral cats, proudly showing their pictures to anyone interested.

She still maintains relationships with some of her former students, who check in on her from time to time. Her teaching career may be over, but her love for students still lives on.

“The kids are what got me here, and it is the kids that kept me here,” she said. ❄



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FICTION



The War That Never Ended:

A Letter from the Red Clay, *No One Won Here*

Clayton County, Georgia
November 12, 1920

Dear Child of the Future,

I write to you from a place you will know only through the stories of others, a place whose red clay will stain your imagination if you let it. I do not know your name, but I know your blood—because this land, and the way it remembers, binds us.

You are the descendant of someone who lived and labored here in Clayton County when the weight of chains had been lifted in name but not in truth. I am the child of a people who walked this land before there were counties or borders, before the names

on maps swallowed the names in our language. My grandparents were here before Georgia was Georgia, before the first shot of the Civil War, and long before the word “reconstruction” meant anything more than rebuilding a burned-down cabin.

By the time I was born, the war between the North and South had been “over” for years. The fighting was done, the guns were quiet, but I tell you the truth: no one won here. Not your people, who were promised freedom but given new chains made of laws and ledgers. Not mine, who were promised peace but found themselves penned in by fences and deeds. Not the poor white farmers either, who bled for a

cause that left them poorer still.

The land did not celebrate either side. The earth was indifferent—it only asked to be worked. It stained the palms of whoever turned it, and it kept its own counsel about who belonged.

When I was a boy, I learned that the human heart can be made into many shapes by the hands that hold it. My grandfather—an old man by then—had seen the war with his own eyes. He told me stories of soldiers in gray and soldiers in blue, and how both left the same scars on the people and the land. He said the smoke of war never really cleared here; it just settled lower, mixing with the morning mist.

We lived near the Flint River, where sycamore trees reached over the water like they were trying to remember their reflections. Your great-grandparents may have stood on the same banks. Perhaps they washed clothes there, or cooled their feet after a day in the fields. The river didn’t care who you were; it welcomed anyone who came thirsty. That was one of the first lessons I learned—that nature could hold a kind of fairness people could not.

Your people and mine were taught to stand apart, to eye each other with suspicion. It was a trick, of course, though as a child I did not see it clearly. I only saw the sameness of hunger, the sameness of calloused hands. Your grandfather’s back bent under the same sun as mine. His crop could fail as quick as ours, his children could sicken in the same summer heat. It wasn’t until I was older that I heard my grandfather put it plain:

“They made us enemies so we wouldn’t notice we were the same kind of poor.”

In those years, I learned to watch people as much as I watched the weather. Humanity, I came to see, is more often divided by what we are told than by what we truly are. That is why I say no one won the Civil War. We all inherited the wounds—just different kinds.

The county itself was a strange blend of beauty and burden. The soil here is stubborn but fertile if you know how to coax it. Spring would arrive with dogwoods and redbuds blooming so bright it was as if the land was apologizing for winter’s cruelty. But the summers were long and heavy, pressing on your chest like a weight. We worked through it all, because the land didn’t wait for comfort—it waited for labor.

I wonder if your people told you the same thing mine told me: Even if the ground is taken, the sky is still yours.

That saying kept us alive in ways I can’t rightly explain. We could not stop the

trains that brought strangers to claim what they did not earn. We could not rewrite the laws that kept us from owning the ground we worked. But we could still look up at night and name the constellations in our own tongues.

I remember once, when I was about sixteen, I asked my grandfather why folks in town still argued over the war. His answer was simple, but it sat with me for years: “They have to believe they won, or else they’d have to face how much they lost.”

And that was it. Those who claimed victory needed the story to soothe them. Those who lost the fight nursed their bitterness like it might keep them warm. But under it all, the truth was the same—loss had no sides.

Your ancestors carried the loss of stolen generations and stolen futures. Mine carried the loss of a homeland we could no longer roam freely. The poor whites carried the loss of a war fought for the wealth of others. All of us lived in the shadow of something we did not start and could not finish.

As the years passed, the county began to change in small ways. By the 1920s, cars rattled down our dirt roads, and the fairgrounds had electric lights. But the land still whispered the old truths to anyone who listened.

We plant. We lose. We plant again. People draw lines; people cross them. The river keeps bending, the trees keep reaching for the sky. The earth does not care who claims it.

I write to you because I hope you will remember that truth when the stories you hear about these years are dressed up in flags and speeches. They will tell you who the heroes were, who was right, who was wrong. Listen, but then look deeper. The truth is not in the speeches—it is in the calluses, in the hunger, in the stubborn act of planting something again after it has been

“

*In its memory,
there are no
winners, no
chosen ones—only
people, all of them
trying to belong
somewhere.*

”

taken from you.

You are the living proof that your ancestors survived what they were not meant to survive. And in that, there is a quiet kind of victory—not the kind shouted in parades or written in books, but the kind that grows roots deep enough to keep from being pulled out.

I am no preacher, but I will leave you with this:

The land remembers. It remembers every hand that worked it, every back bent over it, every life taken too soon upon it. In its memory, there are no winners, no chosen ones—only people, all of them trying to belong somewhere.

May you belong here not because of the battles fought, but because of the life made in their shadow. And may you know, as I came to know, that the ground can be stolen, but the sky—if you lift your head—remains your own. ✘

With respect and remembrance,
A Neighbor in the Red Clay

HISTORY



Celebrating 200 years!

Building a Legacy at First Baptist Jonesboro

By Michael Booth

First Baptist Church of Jonesboro (FBCJ) turns 200 this year, growing from 14 people gathering in a small place of worship on three acres of piney woods just off what would become Tara Boulevard, to its present location in downtown Jonesboro, where the Worship Hall can hold thousands.

“I know the church has a storied history,” said Jackie Brannen, a member of FBCJ for more than three decades, “but the different people we’ve met here is the history that is important to me.”

Brannen spent the first 22 years of his life attending the Church

of Christ, which was located at the end of a shopping center. Then he met Billie, a lifelong member of First Baptist and the woman who would become his wife. When they began dating, the couple would alternate between Jackie’s small church and Billie’s much larger church.

“One Sunday at my church, an elder sidled up to me and said, ‘You know you can’t trust those Baptists.’ I left that church and never looked back,” he said.

Since FBCJ was established as the Flint River Baptist Church in the cold winter months of 1825, it has attracted many like Brannen who desired fellowship with those on a similar spiritual journey. In its first three years, Flint River Baptist Church increased from the original 14 to 79 parishioners.

FBCJ has grown and expanded in its two centuries of existence—sometimes out of necessity, as when the church burned down four times. The first was in 1850, when the original 1840 building was destroyed by flames. It took nine years for the church to rebuild on property it purchased in Leaksville, the original name for Jonesboro. The congregation met at the Methodist Church while the new building was under construction.

However, during the Civil War Battle of Jonesboro in 1864, the church was smashed and burned, probably by cannon fire. A few years later the church changed its name from Flint River Baptist to Jonesboro Baptist Church as it once more constructed a new structure. This building lasted for almost a quarter century before it, too, burned to the ground when struck by lightning during an intense wind-storm in 1892.

The ever-growing church rebuilt a new structure that would seat 500 worshippers. Surprisingly, the church did not bring in a full-time pastor until 1920, when the Reverend Herbert Massey came to town. He was there for only two years before the church facilities were—yes—consumed by fire.

The congregation raised the rebuilding funds with women members selling cakes and candies. The men donated materials and did all of the labor themselves. The church purchased its first electric organ and began its church library during the dark days of the Great Depression, when members forsook one meal per week and donated the cost of that meal to the organ fund.

This hands-on philosophy continues to this day, as FBCJ has numerous community programs such as food distribution, a clothing ministry that provides used clothing to the needy, and even a free medical

Photos: Facebook.com/firstbaptistjonesboroga

clinic. During the pandemic year of 2023, FBCJ collected and distributed 12,000 weekend meals for homeless children in Clayton County. Recently, the church created Operation Christmas Child, which gave out 2,150 shoeboxes to needy kids.

The James Gang is a group of FBCJ men who work around Clayton County doing jobs such as building 10 wheelchair ramps. The church also has several missionary trips that send volunteers around the country and the world to build churches. Currently, FBCJ has built churches in the Canadian provinces of Calgary, British Columbia, and Newfoundland, as well as Juana Diaz, Puerto Rico, and closer to home in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The church has had an ongoing presence in Cuba for more than 25 years through special dispensation with both the U.S. and Cuban governments. FBCJ has planted churches in Santiago de Cuba and Matanzas. In Haiti, where gangs rule much of the countryside, the church has begun a school that has more than 100 students.

In the war-torn nation of Ukraine, the church has sent multiple teams to minister to internally displaced people while planting churches in several regions.

Building must be in the DNA of church members, because when yet another fire destroyed the oldest church building in 2000, members took this as a challenge and replaced that structure two years later with the Recreational Outreach Building (ROC). This multi-purpose recreational center offers classes from ballroom dancing to pickleball. Kids participate in basketball and volleyball leagues, which is close to Brannen’s heart.

“I’ve been working with those young folk for more than 25 years. The biggest thing I am is an ‘encourager.’ I hug ‘em and encourage them. I’m proud to say I’ve never choked one of them,” he said with a laugh.

Jonesboro Baptist Church changed its name to First Baptist Church of Jonesboro in 1955. During that time a number of ministers have led the church. Brannen has been present for three of the pastors, including the present pastor, Dr. Melvin Blackaby, who came to the church in 2008.

“All three of these men have brought the word of God,” he said.

For those looking for an ideal church that meets both spiritual and physical needs, Brannen said FBCJ offers a clear path to a faith-based journey. The church’s motto is: We live to glorify God by making disciples who invest in others and impact the nations.

“But keep looking if you are trying to find a perfect church,” Brannen said. “Because when you go there it won’t be perfect anymore.” ❌

“
The biggest thing I am is an encourager. I hug ‘em and encourage them. I’m proud to say I’ve never choked one of them.”



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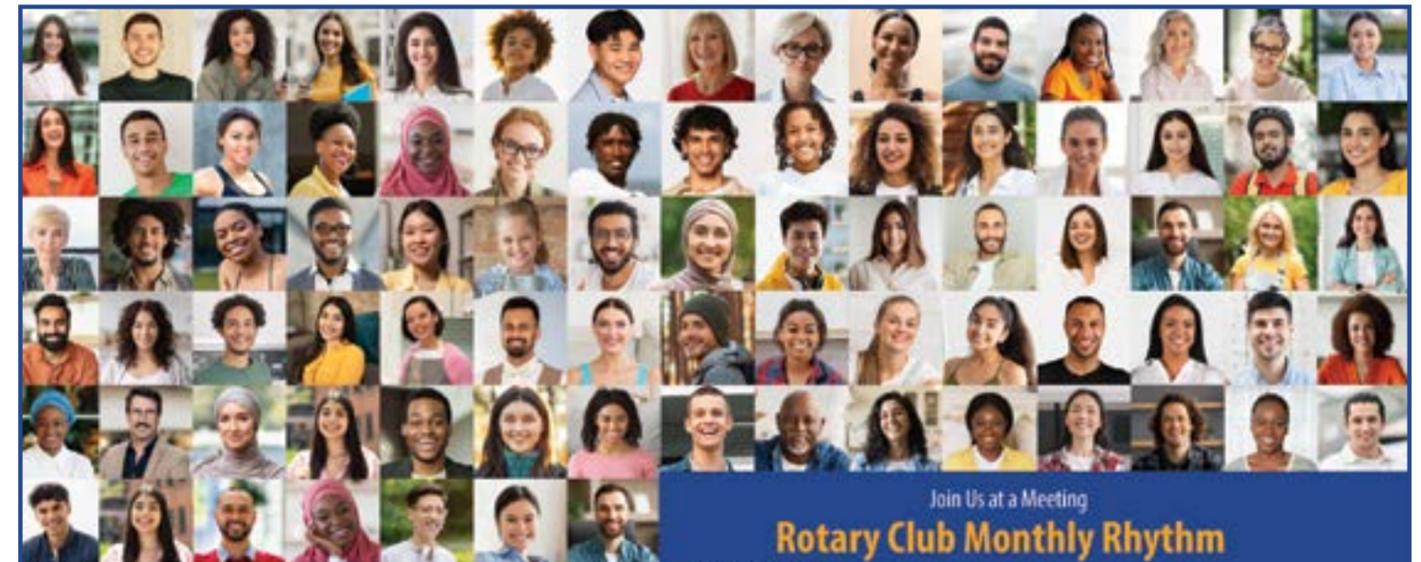


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Rooted in Business: Growing Opportunities in Clayton County

By Justin Carmichael

“

Clayton County offers the best of all worlds. Our culture is a unique tapestry, that blends suburban friendliness with big-city assets,

”

Valencia Williamson, President & CEO of the Clayton County Chamber of Commerce.



Photo 4: "The session 'Closing the Wealth Gap Through Business, Policy, and Supplier Diversity' brought powerful voices to the table, underscoring the role of intentional partnerships in shaping a stronger future."

Photo 5: "Summit speakers stood shoulder to shoulder, united in purpose. Their message was clear: true progress requires collaboration, vision, and a commitment to equity."



Photo 1: "From policy to practice, thought leaders took the stage to share bold ideas for driving regional growth. The Tri-County Economic Development Summit sparked conversations that go beyond county lines."

Photo 2: "In a candid exchange, panelists explored how business, policy, and supplier diversity intersect to create lasting economic opportunity. 'Closing the wealth gap is not just a goal—it's a necessity,' one speaker emphasized."

Photo 3: "With notebooks open and minds engaged, community and business leaders leaned into the conversation. The summit wasn't just about ideas—it was about action."

From Jonesboro's historic main street to the global gateways of Forest Park, Clayton County has always been a crossroads. What once grew in small plots of farmland now blossoms into diverse industries: family-owned restaurants, international distributors, cutting-edge healthcare, and even film production.

Like the trees that line Tara Boulevard, Clayton's business community has weathered storms and change. But each new generation has put down roots here, anchoring their work in both opportunity and resilience.

"Clayton County offers the best of all worlds. Our culture is a unique tapestry, that blends suburban

friendliness with big-city assets," says Valencia Williamson, President & CEO of the Clayton County Chamber of Commerce. "Our businesses thrive because we make our business relationships personal."

And those roots run deep. Churches, civic organizations, and family-owned enterprises form the bedrock of Clayton's economy, passing down not just businesses but values of perseverance and service. Today, the county is a place where tradition meets innovation: a family-run barbecue restaurant can thrive alongside a global logistics company, each feeding into the same ecosystem of growth.

The strength of Clayton's economy comes not only from its geographic advantage—sitting in the shadow of the world's busiest airport—but from its people. Entrepreneurs here are builders. They see possibility in vacant storefronts, cultivate ideas in community programs, and

often grow their businesses with the same determination their parents and grandparents used to tend the land.

Doing business in Clayton County isn't just about paperwork—it's about planting yourself in a community that values connection and reciprocity. Entrepreneurs quickly learn that visibility here comes through involvement: sponsoring youth sports, supporting schools, and showing up for civic life.

"It's such an honor to receive this award, because we see our company as a citizen of the community," said Barbara Casey Lane, CEO of LTI and 2025 Businesswoman of the Year. "As a business owner in the community, I recognize how important it is to bring good jobs, create commerce, and care for those in our midst along the way."

Her words echo Clayton's business culture: to grow here is to grow together.

In Clayton County, commerce is never rootless. Every new venture is tied back to the soil of community—nourished by connection, strengthened by history, and reaching toward a future that is as expansive as the Metro Atlanta sky. ✖

Photos Courtesy of South Atlanta Media, Inc.

Steps to Plant Your Business in Clayton County

Step 1: Prepare the Ground

- Choose your structure (LLC, corporation, sole proprietorship).
- Register with the Georgia Secretary of State at sos.ga.gov.
- Obtain your Employer Identification Number (EIN) from the IRS.

Step 2: Get Licensed

- Apply for an Occupational Tax Certificate through Clayton County's Business License Division.
- If inside city limits (Jonesboro, Forest Park, Riverdale, etc.), check for additional city permits.

Step 3: Tap Into Local Resources

- Clayton County Chamber of Commerce – networking and advocacy.
- Clayton State University SBDC – free consulting and workshops.
- Clayton County Economic Development Office – incentives and site selection support.

Step 4: Nurture Your Network

- Join civic groups and community service efforts.
- Partner with local schools, nonprofits, and events.

Step 5: Grow With Intention

- Use state incentives (tax credits, workforce training, Opportunity Zone programs).
- Keep your business rooted in both profitability and community impact.



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TECHNOLOGY



Clayton County Public Schools and the Future of Technology: A Regional Perspective

By Sabrina Gilmore

In the summer of 2025, Clayton County Public Schools (CCPS) joined a growing number of districts across Georgia that are making bold moves in education technology. By releasing its first Artificial Intelligence Position Statement in August, CCPS signaled that it intends to chart a careful but forward-looking path into the digital era. This document emphasizes ethics, instructional use, and operational efficiency, while also promising that the district will keep the community engaged in shaping the role of AI in schools. At a time when parents and educators alike are debating the risks and rewards of artificial intelligence, Clayton's statement reflects both caution and possibility.

But technology is never just about the tools. It is about access, equity, and the structures that support learning. That reality is visible in CCPS's updated device distribution policy. Beginning this school year, students in grades K-8 will use district-issued laptops and tablets only during the school day. Take-home privileges are reserved for high school students, who continue to receive devices under signed agreements. District leaders have explained that this adjustment is about sustainability—repair costs, lost equipment, and ongoing replacement cycles make it difficult to extend one-to-one access for every grade. The policy is not unusual. Across Metro Atlanta, many districts are reevaluating how they manage devices, balancing equity with long-term financial responsibility.



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Cell phones represent another critical front in the technology debate. Clayton, like its neighbors, is preparing for Georgia's new Distraction-Free Education Act, which will prohibit K-8 students from using personal electronic devices during instructional hours starting in 2026-27. This law has accelerated conversations about phone-free classrooms.

DeKalb County has already expanded its "Disconnect to Reconnect" program districtwide, while Henry County has gone further with a full K-12 ban effective July 2025. Fulton County has adopted a middle ground, restricting personal devices during the school day for younger students but leaving limited use for high school. Clayton's current policies will need to evolve quickly to meet the statewide mandate, giving the district both a challenge and an opportunity to set clear routines before the law takes effect.

Looking across the region, several patterns emerge. Atlanta Public Schools has positioned itself as a leader in AI ethics and academic integrity, providing families with clear guidelines on the appropriate use of emerging tools. Fulton County Schools has taken the lead on professional development, promising to train all elementary teachers and school leaders on AI integration in 2025-26, following earlier training for grades 6-12. Gwinnett County has adopted a "human-centered AI" approach, embedding responsible use into its broader digital ecosystem, which includes the eCLASS learning portal. DeKalb has paired its phone restrictions with an innovative Cyber Champions program, giving students the chance to become leaders in AI literacy and digital safety. These examples show that while every district is experimenting with different approaches, all are recognizing that technology cannot be left to chance—it requires frameworks, supports, and intentional culture-building.

For CCPS, the comparisons offer both validation and direction. The new AI Position Statement places the district in step with regional peers, but there is more to be done. Best practices suggest a few clear priorities. First, CCPS should consider expanding role-specific professional development, ensuring not only high school teachers but also elementary staff and administrators are comfortable with AI tools. Second, the district can strengthen its equity supports by offering hotspot lending or extended media center hours for families without reliable internet at home. Third, measuring success through outcomes rather than tool counts—such as reading growth, teacher time saved, or improved operations—will keep the focus on learning rather than novelty. Finally, CCPS might borrow from DeKalb's ambassador model by launching a student tech leadership program, building literacy and ownership among the very learners these systems are meant to serve.

The bottom line is this: Clayton County Public Schools is not standing still. By rethinking device access, preparing for stricter cell phone policies, and committing to ethical AI adoption, the district has entered the center of a broader Metro Atlanta conversation about the future of digital learning. The work ahead lies in balancing innovation with equity, ensuring that technology enhances education rather than distracting from it. If Clayton continues to learn from its neighbors while adapting to its own community's needs, it has the chance not just to keep pace with best practices but to set them. ✖

Quick Take Aways

By Sabrina Gilmore

BEST PRACTICES FOR CCPS

1. Expand Professional Development – Provide role-specific AI training for all staff, not just secondary teachers.
2. Close the Equity Gap – Offer hotspot lending or extended media-center hours for students with limited home access.
3. Measure Outcomes – Focus on student growth, teacher time saved, and operational improvements rather than number of tools used.
4. Engage Families Early – Roll out communications and storage routines ahead of the statewide phone ban.
5. Student Leadership – Consider a Tech Ambassador program modeled on DeKalb's Cyber Champions.

REGIONAL TECH TRENDS

- AI adoption is spreading fast—Fulton leads in teacher training, Gwinnett in structured frameworks.
- Device sustainability is reshaping access policies, with Clayton among several districts limiting take-home programs.
- Phone bans are converging across Metro Atlanta, accelerated by the state law for 2026-27.

HOW SURROUNDING DISTRICTS LEAD

- Atlanta Public Schools (APS): Clear guidance on AI ethics and academic integrity.
- Fulton County: Ahead on professional development, training all K-5 teachers and leaders in AI integration this school year.
- Gwinnett County: Promotes a "human-centered AI" framework alongside its eCLASS digital learning portal.
- DeKalb County: Pairs phone restrictions with its Cyber Champions program, empowering students to lead on AI literacy and digital safety.

DEVICES: ACCESS VS. SUSTAINABILITY

This school year, CCPS shifted its device model. Students in grades K-8 now use district-issued devices only at school, while high school students may continue to take them home under usage agreements.

- Leaders cited sustainability concerns, including repair costs and replacement cycles, as the reason behind the adjustment.
- The move aligns CCPS with several other Georgia districts facing the same balance between equity and long-term affordability.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Clayton County's new AI roadmap and device policies place the district in step with its Metro Atlanta peers. Yet the true test lies ahead: balancing innovation with equity, managing access responsibly, and preparing students to thrive in a technology-driven future. *For more information visit CCPS website.*

INNOVATION



A New Stage for Clayton: The Convocation Center & Career Academy

By Sabrina Gilmore

When Clayton County Public Schools (CCPS) broke ground at the former Sears site at Southlake Mall in December 2023, it wasn't just about construction—it was about transformation. Rising on this familiar footprint is the Clayton County Convocation Center and College & Career Academy, a \$117 million project designed to anchor both education and community life for decades to come.

A Vision for the Future

For years, CCPS graduations have been scattered across borrowed stages and rented arenas. The new convocation center changes that. With 8,000 seats, a modern convention hall, and flexible event spaces, the venue will become the permanent home for commencement ceremonies, district-wide gatherings, and civic celebrations.

"This is more than a building—it's a promise to our students that their achievements will always have a stage," said Superintendent Dr. Anthony Smith at the groundbreaking.

Innovation Meets Education

The project is about more than caps and gowns. The facility will also house a College and Career Academy, where students will explore post-secondary pathways in fields ranging from healthcare to

technology. A Junior Achievement Center will bring hands-on learning opportunities, equipping students with entrepreneurial skills and real-world experience.

"We are building a place where education and opportunity intersect," explained Board Chair Jessie Goree. "Our young people deserve access to the tools that will define tomorrow's workforce."

A Community Investment

At its core, the Convocation Center is also a story of partnership. CCPS committed roughly \$55 million to the project, supported by a \$10 million investment from Clayton County Government. By choosing to repurpose the former Sears store, the district demonstrated both sustainability and a belief in breathing new life into familiar community landmarks.

The overall budget—estimated at \$117 million—reflects not just the cost of construction, but the scale of ambition. With amenities like a rooftop terrace and dedicated office spaces, the facility is designed to serve both educational and economic goals.

"Every dollar invested here is an investment in Clayton County's future," said county officials at the groundbreaking. "This center will attract events, businesses, and energy back into our community."

Beyond the Arena

The Convocation Center is part of a larger wave of capital improvements shaping Clayton schools. Plans include an indoor track and even a 9-hole executive golf course at North Clayton High School—projects that underscore the district's commitment to health, athletics, and student engagement.

Together, these initiatives point toward a district that is not just adapting, but reimagining what education looks like in the 21st century.

The symbolism of this project cannot be overstated. Built in the shell of a former retail giant, the Convocation Center represents renewal—turning a space of commerce into a space of learning, community, and growth.

"Where one chapter of our community closed, another begins," said a CCPS parent at the groundbreaking. "This is the kind of investment that tells our children they matter."

Looking Ahead

Expected to open in 2025, the Convocation Center will quickly become a landmark, hosting graduations, conventions, and community events. More importantly, it will stand as a physical reminder of Clayton County's priorities: education, opportunity, and pride of place.

For the students who will cross its stage, the message is clear: Clayton County believes in their future—and is building the structures to prove it. ✖



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MADE IN CLAYTON



TOTO USA: Global Innovation with Deep Roots in Clayton County

By Sabrina Gilmore
Photos Courtesy of TOTO

Image 1 (Bright bathroom with tub and toilet) "TOTO brings timeless design and modern comfort together in this light-filled bathroom retreat."

Image 2 (Toilet glowing in the dark) "Innovation illuminated: TOTO's advanced WASHLET technology redefines cleanliness and comfort."

Image 3 (Sleek gray sink and faucet) "Minimalist elegance: TOTO's modern basin and fixtures transform everyday spaces into works of art."

When people think of international business, they often picture towering skyscrapers in New York or bustling ports in Los Angeles. But one of the most important global brands in home and bathroom technology has quietly made its home in Clayton County for nearly three decades. TOTO USA, the American subsidiary of Japan's renowned TOTO Ltd., operates its U.S. manufacturing headquarters in Morrow, Georgia. Since 1996, this facility has served as both a production hub and a testament to Clayton County's role in the global economy.

In 2024, TOTO reinforced its commitment

to the region by announcing a \$238 million expansion at its Morrow campus. While the project won't add new jobs, it will retain about 300 employees and significantly increase wages, raising the average salary from \$56,000 to approximately \$70,000. At the same time, the plant's production capacity will jump by 50 percent, making it possible to manufacture as many as 300,000 bathroom fixtures annually.

Economic Impact and Local Incentives

The expansion highlights the importance of public-private partnerships in sustaining industry. The Clayton County Development Authority approved a

bond-for-title arrangement—an incentive structure often used to provide temporary property tax abatements. Though the agency declined to disclose the exact value of TOTO's package, similar projects in the county have used a 10-year phased abatement, gradually reducing tax breaks until full obligations resume.

Beyond local incentives, TOTO likely benefits from Georgia's statewide business programs. These include the Quick Start workforce training program, which provides customized employee training at no cost to manufacturers, and sales and use tax exemptions on manufacturing equipment. In addition, Clayton County offers Freeport tax exemptions on raw materials and finished goods inventory. Together, these incentives reduce costs for companies while ensuring long-term investment in the community.

For Clayton County, the TOTO project represents stability. Manufacturing jobs have been under pressure in many parts of the U.S., but the decision to reinvest in Morrow signals confidence in the county's workforce, logistics infrastructure, and pro-business climate.

A Commitment to Sustainability

TOTO has also distinguished itself through environmental responsibility, aligning its operations with Georgia's growing emphasis on water conservation. The Morrow plant employs a gray water recycling program, treating and returning used manufacturing water to the Clayton County Water Authority.

In 2007, when the state of Georgia required businesses to cut water usage by 10 percent, TOTO went further. The company reduced its consumption by 25 percent, saving nearly 3.86 million gallons annually. Broken porcelain from the factory is also recycled into raw materials, minimizing landfill waste.

These sustainability initiatives matter not only for the environment but also for Clayton County's image as a forward-thinking manufacturing hub. By adopting greener practices, TOTO demonstrates how industrial activity can coexist with conservation.

“
TOTO's
\$238 million expansion will
boost production capacity
by 50%.
”

Financial and Global Perspective

TOTO Ltd., the parent company based in Kitakyushu, Japan, is one of the world's largest bathroom fixture manufacturers. In fiscal year 2024, it reported ¥724.5 billion in net sales (about \$4.8 billion USD) with operating profits of ¥48.5 billion. The Americas segment, which includes Clayton County operations, contributed approximately ¥70.5 billion in sales, a figure expected to rise to ¥80 billion in the coming year.

This strong performance underscores why the Clayton County expansion is so significant. It places the Morrow facility at the center of TOTO's strategy to grow its North American market, particularly with the rising popularity of the company's WASHLET line of bidet-style toilets.

Looking Ahead

For Clayton County residents, TOTO USA is more than just a manufacturer. It's a steady employer, an innovator in technology, and a steward of environmental responsibility. With the latest expansion, employees will see higher wages, the county will maintain a major international anchor company, and Georgia will strengthen its reputation as a hub for advanced manufacturing.

As global business continues to shift and evolve, TOTO's decision to deepen its roots in Clayton County is a reminder that world-class innovation often flourishes in places where community, workforce, and opportunity intersect. For Morrow, Georgia, that intersection has been—and continues to be—home. ✨

Cutting-Edge Technology in Morrow

What exactly does TOTO USA produce in Clayton County? Beyond traditional toilets and sinks, the company is best known for its pioneering bathroom innovations that combine luxury, hygiene, and sustainability.

- **E-WATER+ Technology:** By using electrolyzed water to clean the bidet wand and mist the toilet bowl, E-WATER+ reduces reliance on harsh chemical cleaners.
- **CEFIONTECT® Glaze:** A nano-smooth ceramic coating that prevents waste buildup, keeping surfaces cleaner for longer and reducing water consumption.
- **TORNADO FLUSH® System:** A powerful yet efficient flushing method that uses strategically positioned nozzles to maximize performance while minimizing gallons per flush.
- **ACTILIGHT® Innovation:** In high-end models, ultraviolet light combines with a special photocatalytic bowl coating to break down residue, leaving surfaces sanitary with minimal maintenance.

These technologies aren't simply imported into the U.S.—they are manufactured and assembled in Clayton County, embedding global innovation in the local economy. Products from the Morrow facility find their way into American homes, hotels, and commercial spaces, showcasing the county's role in shaping next-generation living standards.

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AI: Your Frenemy in the Inbox

(because apparently spellcheck wasn't enough drama)

By Monet Jackson

R

emember when spellcheck was the big bad wolf? Teachers grumbled, bosses sighed, and everyone acted like red squiggly lines were the end of civilization. Fast-forward to today, and now it's AI that's allegedly ruining humanity—one email draft at a time.

Let's be honest: AI is everywhere. It's the "mystery genius" behind your Netflix recommendations, the reason your phone knows how to finish your texts before you do, and yes, the polite-but-slightly-awkward chatbot that pretends it cares about your overdraft fees. Like it or not, you've been using it without even noticing. Surprise—you're part of the robot club.

The upside? AI saves time, makes us look smarter, and bails us out when the cursor blinks back at us like a judgmental therapist. Tools like ChatGPT or Gemini can spin a cover letter, suggest a snappier subject line, or keep you from sounding like you wrote your

email at 2 a.m. after three cups of coffee (which, let's be real, you probably did).

But here comes the side-eye: some folks think leaning on AI is basically catfishing. "Did you write that thank-you email, or was it Siri in a trench coat?" they ask. And hey, fair question. An email is personal. If a bot did 100% of the heavy lifting, is it still your voice—or are you just the human equivalent of an AI sock puppet?

The truth: both camps have a point. Yes, AI sometimes makes stuff up. Yes, it can sound generic if you let it. And sure, if you outsource every single word, maybe take a long, hard look in the mirror. But also? Let's not pretend we haven't been cheating with tools forever. Microsoft Word templates didn't destroy authenticity. Google Translate didn't wipe out language teachers. AI is just the new kid at the office—annoying sometimes, helpful most of the time, and always stealing your snacks from the break room.

Here's the deal: AI isn't going away. The trick is to use it like seasoning, not the main dish. Let it help you brainstorm, then add your own spice. Skim what it spits out, tweak it, inject your sarcasm, your quirks, your "you-ness." That way, the email still sounds like you, but less like you on your fifth draft and ready to throw your laptop out the window.

So maybe the real question isn't, "Did AI write this?" but, "Does it work?" If the person reading your message feels seen, respected, and maybe even amused, who cares who typed the first draft? Authenticity isn't about who pressed the keys—it's about whether the message lands.

In other words: use the robots, don't become the robots. ✖

10 Quick Tips for Surviving AI

(Without
Becoming a
Robot)

By Monet Jackson

- 1. Don't copy-paste and pray.** Skim it. AI sometimes thinks $2 + 2 = 5$.
- 2. Add your flavor.** A joke, a phrase, even a typo. Humans are messy—own it.
- 3. Never trust AI with names.** Unless you want to call your boss "Dear Taco Bell."
- 4. Use it as a starting block,** not a final draft. Think sous-chef, not head chef.
- 5. Watch out for "AI voice."** If it sounds off, it is.
- 6. Limit the jargon.** "Synergize scalable paradigms"? What the.the hell! That's a robot not a human.
- 7. Keep it short.** AI loves to ramble like your uncle after a cookout.
- 8. Fact-check everything.** AI has confidence issues—it's very sure about being wrong.
- 9. Use it to spark ideas,** not replace them. Think teammate, not puppet master.
- 10. Remember the point.** If the reader gets it, feels it, or laughs—mission accomplished.

LEADERSHIP



Rooted in Courage: The Quiet Moment That Shaped My Leadership

Sometimes the most profound leadership lessons don't come from titles or training—they come from the choices we make when no one's watching.

By Valencia Williamson

When I think about the roots that anchor my leadership values, I don't think of academic credentials, a job title, or even generational legacy. I think of a moment in the formative—and seemingly insignificant—world of middle school, an experience that taught me an extraordinary lesson about courage and compassion.

I was twelve when I first encountered the subtle pressure of groupthink and the quiet courage it takes to go against it.

There was a girl in our class who didn't quite fit the mold. She was prim, petite, soft-spoken, and a little quirky—different enough to become a target. One day, a popular classmate decided she didn't belong, and without much questioning, the rest of us fell in line. Word spread quickly: we were to stop speaking to her. No reasons were offered. No one pushed back. It was an unspoken social directive—and I complied. *At first.*

But something about the whole situation unsettled me. Week after week, the silence surrounding her became more uncomfortable. And so did my participation in it. I didn't have the words for it then, but what I was feeling were the early stirrings of empathy—and a quiet recognition of the harm caused by social exclusion.

Eventually, during a physical education class, I walked up to her and struck up a conversation. I told her I didn't understand what

we were doing or why, and that I was sorry.

That brief exchange became the foundation of a friendship that's lasted more than three decades. To this day, she remains one of my closest confidants—the person I call when I need clarity and grounding.

That experience taught me something I carry with me to this day as a leader: *Do what is right, not what is popular.*

We are rooted in values, in people, in choices, and in experiences that shape who we are. That one shaped me.

I learned that leadership requires courage, humility, and honesty—which can be daunting at times. It asks you to take bold stands against injustice, to make tough, unpopular decisions for the greater good, and to practice accountability and self-reflection.

Today, I look back at my 12-year-old self and recognize that it was my first real act of leadership. It didn't happen on a stage or behind a podium. It happened in a quiet moment of conviction, born from discomfort and compassion. I didn't have the vocabulary for it at the time, but I knew what felt right—and I followed that knowing.

That's the kind of leadership I still believe in. The kind rooted not in power, but in principle. Not in applause, but in integrity.

As you lead—at work, in your family, in your community—pause and ask yourself: Am I choosing what's right, or what's easy.

Sometimes the most profound leadership lessons are rooted in the quiet choices we make. ✖

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JUSTICE, COMMUNITY, AND THE HUMAN SIDE OF LAW

By Gerrian Hawes
Photos By "Charlemagne"

Inside Clayton County's Solicitor General's Office with
Charles Brooks, Kydra Finn, and Tommy Henderson

61

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When people hear “Solicitor General,” they picture courtrooms and codes. What they rarely see is the human work: fixing records that block jobs, listening to angry residents until a real need surfaces, and building cases that are fair to victims and defendants. In Clayton County, Solicitor General Charles Brooks and his leadership team—Chief of Staff Kydra Finn and Chief Investigator Tommy Henderson—are making the case that local justice is not just a set of penalties. It’s a public-service system designed to reduce harm, improve outcomes, and tell the truth about a community that is often misread.

THE CASE FOR SECOND CHANCES

In July, the office partnered with five of the county’s seven municipalities to run a Record Restriction and Career Expo at Riverdale Town Center. It looked like a job fair, felt like a legal clinic, and functioned like a reset button.

“Roughly 330 people came,” Brooks says. “More than 100 had records restricted. Several received on-site interviews and offers. A national vendor helped attendees process out-of-state issues that normally stall applications. We waived fees, pre-registered, ran full reviews with Georgia Justice, and walked petitions to the court for signature. The goal was simple: one day from paperwork to relief.”

The distinction matters. In Georgia, what most people casually refer to as “expungement” is legally called record restriction. The state has a specific framework, and when it comes to misdemeanors, it is relatively forgiving.

For example, misdemeanor arrests that do not result in conviction can be restricted, as can cases that end in acquittal or are not prosecuted. In addition, individuals may be eligible to have up to two misdemeanor convictions restricted over the course of their lifetime, provided that certain legal criteria and timelines are met. The point, Brooks argues, is public safety, not optics. “Stable work, stable housing, and access to education reduce recidivism. If a dismissed case from ten years ago still blocks a healthcare job, that’s not accountability; that’s friction. Our role is to clear what the law allows so people can move.”

Henderson agrees. He’s the one who sees the practical fallout: background checks derailing apartment applications, financial aid denials over arrests that never became convictions, and the mental health toll of being locked out of opportunity. “Victims deserve closure. Defendants deserve due process. Our job is to get both right.”

RECORD RESTRICTION, PLAINLY

Legal language can make simple things sound complicated. Here’s the version residents need:

- **What it is:** Record restriction limits public access to certain criminal history entries under Georgia law. It doesn’t rewrite the past; it updates what others can see.



- **What it does:** It can remove barriers to jobs, housing, licensing, and education when the law says an incident should no longer follow someone.

- **Who qualifies:** People with non-conviction entries, acquittals, cases not prosecuted, and—under set limits—up to two misdemeanor convictions across a lifetime.

- **What it’s not:** A blanket eraser. Violent felonies, active cases, and ineligible offenses remain visible. The screening is rigorous by design.

At the expo, staff handled the legwork residents usually pay for and puzzle through alone: records pulls, legal screening, petition drafting, filing, and orders. Then employers stepped in. “Relief is only half the story,” Brooks says. “A job offer turns relief into momentum.”

BUILDING CASES THE RIGHT WAY

If the expo showed the office’s social service side, Chief Henderson’s unit shows its prosecutorial spine. He describes the space his team occupies between arrest and verdict. “Patrol officers stop at probable cause. We have to prove beyond a reasonable doubt. That gap is evidence.”

His investigators retrieve body-worn camera, 911 audio, surveillance, certified convictions

“How much would you pay for a new life? For freedom?”

Photo Above
Solicitor General Charles Brooks seated with his leadership team—Chief of Staff Kydra Finn and Chief Investigator Tommy Henderson.

“
*Too often,
 we let
 others tell
 our story
 when we
 should be
 telling it
 ourselves.*
 ”



from other jurisdictions, and medical records with proper releases. They re-interview witnesses when early statements are thin or conflicted. They photograph scenes if the initial response missed key angles. And they document every step so a judge and jury can follow the logic.

Precision, not punishment, is the goal. “When the facts don’t support a charge, we say so,” Henderson notes. “When they do, we put the right evidence in the right order so the outcome is fair—and durable on appeal.”

**FROM MORROW TO THE COURTHOUSE:
 Charles BROOKS’ PATH**

Brooks arrived in Clayton County in third grade, attending Morrow Elementary, Babb Middle, and Forest Park High. His family was one of the first Black families on their block; both his father and a close friend’s father worked at the Ford plant, a reliable wage engine that supported households across county lines until it closed. “Those were good jobs,” he says. “They paid mortgages and

sent kids to college.”

He once wanted to be an architect—he could draw, he says—but never found the math instruction or encouragement that would keep him on that track. After a stint in Japan and an internship at the Clayton County District Attorney’s Office, he caught what he calls “the criminal-law bug.” The work was compelling; the weight was real. “At the DA’s office you handle murders, rapes, molestations. Important work—but not something I want to carry in my spirit every day.” The Solicitor’s Office, which prosecutes misdemeanors, offered a chance to deter behavior before it becomes felony conduct.

The through-line is service to the place that raised him. “I knew I would be a leader in this county—if not in this office, then somewhere else. I wanted to help steer the culture in a better direction.”

THE PILLARS—OPERATIONAL, NOT DECORATIVE

Brooks keeps the organization fastened to four values—community, integrity, fairness, confidence—and expects to see them in daily behavior, not on poster stock.

- Community means being known outside the courtroom. Staff give talks at senior centers, youth programs, HOAs, and civic groups. “If the first time a juror hears my voice is in court,” Brooks says, “I haven’t done my job in the community.”

- Integrity means evidence over ego. “The badge doesn’t make you right,” he says. “The facts do.”

- Fairness means charging what the evidence supports, not stacking counts to leverage pleas. It means using diversion when it serves accountability and safety.

- Confidence means predictable hours, plain-language forms, and decisions residents can track. Without that, even correct outcomes feel arbitrary.

Chief of Staff Kydra Finn turns those values into systems. She runs HR, budget, policy, vendor partnerships, and the infrastructure for outreach and diversion. She’s also the person residents see when they arrive upset. “People come in hot and say, ‘My taxes pay you.’ My response is, ‘What do you actually need?’ If the core issue is an eviction, a

blocked enlistment, or unemployment benefits, we route them to the right help. Speaking ‘community’ lowers the temperature.”

MODERNIZING ACCESS

When Brooks took office, the public counter closed for lunch. “If you work a shift job and your lunch is your only window to file paperwork, a closed counter is not ‘small.’ It’s a barrier.” Today the office staggered schedules so residents can file during the noon hour.

The office has identified several next steps to strengthen its approach and improve outcomes. A new digital intake system will capture the right facts at the outset, reducing unnecessary back-and-forth calls. Standardized checklists will be introduced to determine diversion eligibility, ensuring that offers remain consistent and legally defensible. To support transparency, plain-language timelines will explain each stage after a citation or arrest, helping residents understand what happens next and why.

As the solicitor notes, “Data isn’t decoration.” With that in mind, the office is developing a dashboard to track key measures: the average time from citation to disposition, the number of record-restriction petitions approved and their downstream outcomes such as job offers from partner employers, community engagement efforts like talks, clinics, and school visits with attendance records, and victim feedback regarding communication, timelines, and satisfaction with outcomes. “If we don’t measure, we’re guessing. If we’re guessing, we’re not improving,” Brooks adds, underscoring the importance of data-driven progress.

DIVERSION WITH TEETH

Diversion is not a pass; it’s a plan. The office uses it for eligible misdemeanors when accountability and future safety are better served by treatment, education, or restitution than by jail.

A typical agreement might include:

- A verified assessment (substance use, anger management, financial responsibility)
- Classes or counseling from vetted providers
- Restitution or community service tied to the harm
- A no-new-arrests period and compliance checks

Completion results in dismissal where allowed.

Failure returns the case to the traditional path. “You cannot punish your way to public safety,” Brooks says, “but you can structure your way toward better behavior.”

HIRING WITH ROOTS

The majority of staff live in Clayton County by choice, and that’s intentional. “Vested people protect standards,” Brooks says. Finn sits on most interviews and asks every candidate to describe their tie to Clayton. “Government work won’t make you rich,” she says. “It can make you useful. If you live here, you feel every decision twice—as an employee and as a neighbor.”

Living locally also disciplines the culture. Staff see residents at the grocery store, in school pickup lines, and at Friday night games. “That proximity keeps you honest,” Henderson says. “You don’t cut corners you’ll have to explain to your neighbor on Saturday.”



SERVING A MAJORITY-MINORITY COUNTY

Clayton County is a majority-minority community with its own history of heavy-handed policing and outside misperceptions. Brooks doesn’t gloss over any of it. “The hardest part is the thankless nature of the work,” he says. “People say, ‘My tax dollars pay you.’ That’s not a license to be abusive. We won’t match energy. We’ll exceed it with service and facts.”

Finn’s view is pragmatic: the anger is often about something else. “If someone is shouting at the counter, the legal issue may be real, but the source is usually stress—housing, a deadline, a job offer on hold. Once you identify the need, the temperature drops.”

Henderson frames it as stewardship. “We remind the team we are public servants first. That means clear explanations, clean evidence, and respecting everyone in the process—victims, witnesses, and defendants.”

COMMUNITY WORK OUTSIDE THE COURTROOM

Court calendars are not the only calendars the office keeps. Staff schedule know-your-rights sessions, youth clinics on navigating citations, and senior-center talks about scams, guardianship, and traffic court. Those interactions create a baseline of familiarity so that when a resident becomes a juror or a witness, the first contact isn’t adversarial.

Brooks insists on early education: what to do after receiving a citation, how to secure a public defender, how to document injuries or property damage properly, and how to follow up with victim services. “If we can answer a question before it becomes a failure-to-appear, we should,” he says.

PRIDE WITHOUT SPIN

The solicitor general speaks plainly about his relationship with the county. “It’s a love-hate story.



Clayton County, Solicitor General Charles Brooks

I love the place that birthed and raised me. I hate how it's often portrayed—by outsiders and sometimes by us. We have to tell our own story and stop waiting for others to sing our praises.”

He points to assets that surrounding counties envy: senior centers and recreation facilities in every district, a pattern of public investment that treats residents like stakeholders. He also points to the cost of old reputations—aggressive policing in earlier decades, stories of profiling that linger in community memory. “You fix culture by modeling it, not marketing it,” he says.

WHAT FAIR LOOKS LIKE

Ask Solicitor Brooks what fairness looks like in practice and he'll list decisions that sound mundane but matter:

- Charging what can be proved, not what might scare a plea.
- Offering consistent diversion based on eligibility, not personality.
- Saying no to cases that lack the elements, even when the headlines would be easier if you said yes.
- Respecting victims with clear timelines and call-backs that match promises.
- Owning mistakes quickly and publicly—correct the record and move.

“Fairness is a chain of small choices,” he says. “You break one link and trust snaps.”

THE LUNCH-HOUR WINDOW AND OTHER SMALL BIG THINGS

The office now stays open through lunch. It sounds minor until you're

the warehouse worker whose only free hour is 12:00–1:00. They're also rewriting letters and forms into plain English, eliminating jargon where possible, and adding QR codes that jump to checklists and next steps.

“People don't forget how you treated them,” Finn says. “If the process feels clear—even when the answer is ‘no’—they'll say the office was competent. That's how you build confidence.”

THE METRICS THAT MATTER

Brooks is blunt about measurement. “If we want better outcomes, we need numbers we're willing to look at every week.” His short list:

1. Speed: Average days from citation to disposition, with targets by case type.
2. Diversion: Enrollment, completion, and one-year re-of fense.
3. Record Restriction: Petitions approved; partner-employer interviews and offers linked to relief.
4. Victim Services: Timeliness of first contact; satisfaction with clarity and timetables.
5. Community Touchpoints: Events delivered, attendance, and questions logged—because questions tell you where confusion lives.

The goal isn't glossy reports; it's course correction. “If something's slow, we fix the choke point. If a form confuses half the people who get it, we rewrite the form.”

WHAT RESIDENTS SHOULD KNOW RIGHT NOW

- If you think you qualify for record restriction: Gather case numbers and dispositions; the office can help screen eligibility and file petitions where the law allows.
- If you receive a citation: Do not ignore it. Show up. If you need counsel, ask. The worst outcomes usually start with a missed date.
- If you are a victim: Document everything, keep receipts, save messages, and ask for the victim-witness advocate assigned to your case.
- If you're unsure where to start: Come during lunch—the counter is open.

WHY THIS WORK IS LOCAL

Strip away the legal language and the work narrows to decisions neighbors feel:

- An investigator pulls a 911 tape before a witness moves away.
- A chief of staff turns a counter argument into a housing referral.
- A solicitor keeps the window open—literally at noon and figuratively for people who qualify for a second chance. “That's the job,” Brooks says. “Not headlines. Outcomes.”

Clayton County's story is complicated. So is the work of public safety. Brooks, Finn, and Henderson are not selling perfection; they're building competence, clarity, and access—one case, one clinic, one counter conversation at a time. If justice is local, this is what it looks like. ✖



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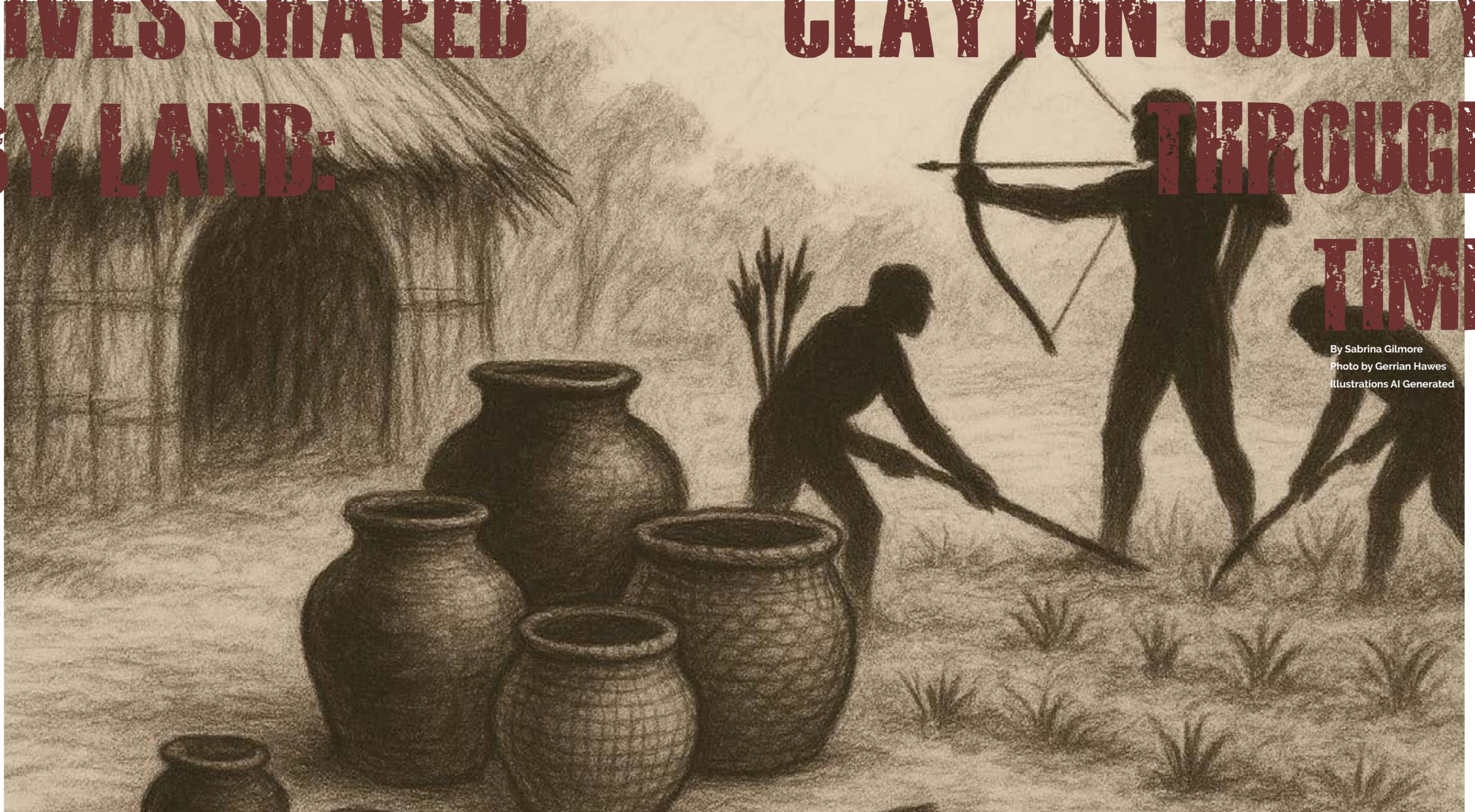
LIVES SHAPED

BY LAND:

CLAYTON COUNTY

THROUGH

TIME



By Sabrina Gilmore
Photo by Gerrian Hawes
Illustrations AI Generated



Clayton County, Georgia—often celebrated today for its diversity, role as a transportation hub, and proximity to Atlanta—sits on land shaped by centuries of conflict and struggle. Behind the highways and neighborhoods lies a history not only of railroads, battles, and growth, but also of removal, enslavement, segregation, and systemic racism. To understand Clayton fully, we must face the past that still echoes in its present.

BEFORE CLAYTON: THE CREEK HOMELAND

Long before Clayton County was established in 1858, the land was home to the Muskogean-speaking Creek Confederacy. For thousands of years,

Creek families lived, farmed, and hunted along the Flint and South Rivers. Archaeological finds—spear points, pottery shards, and burial mounds—attest to thriving villages dating back to 4000 BC.

This homeland was stripped away through treaties signed under pressure and deceit. The most infamous, the Treaty of Indian Springs (1821), forced the Creek to cede vast stretches of land, including what would become Clayton County. Many Creek leaders opposed the agreement, calling it fraudulent, but the U.S. government enforced it.

By the 1830s, the Indian Removal Act sealed their fate. Creek families were marched westward, often at gunpoint, on

routes tied to the Trail of Tears. Thousands died from disease, starvation, and exhaustion. By the time Clayton County was founded, the original stewards of the land were gone—erased not only physically but also from local memory. Farms, railroads, and plantations rose where Creek villages once stood, their stories buried beneath the soil.

SLAVERY AND THE COTTON ECONOMY

The county's early economy was built on slavery. Cotton was king, and enslaved Africans were its labor force. Plantations dotted the land, their profits tied directly to the Macon & Western Railroad running through Jonesboro.

Enslaved men, women, and children cleared fields, planted cotton, built infrastructure, and labored in households. They endured violence, family separations, and daily exploitation. Their labor produced the wealth that sustained Clayton's white landowners and fed Georgia's economy, yet their voices and contributions were silenced in official histories.

When the Civil War broke out, Clayton's enslaved population was both witness and participant. Some escaped to freedom, joining Union camps or offering labor to the cause. Others were trapped, forced to endure the upheaval of battle on the very land they had worked.

CIVIL WAR: THE BATTLE THAT DOOMED ATLANTA

Clayton County became infamous during the Atlanta Campaign of 1864, when Union General William T. Sherman sought to break the Confederacy by seizing Atlanta's railroads.

The Battle of Jonesborough (August 31–September 1, 1864) was decisive. Confederate troops under General William Hardree could not hold against the Union assault. When the railroad line was cut, Atlanta's supplies were severed. On September 2, the city fell—an outcome that bolstered Lincoln's re-election and hastened the Confederacy's defeat.

Nearby, the Battle of Lovejoy's Station (August and September 1864) saw Union cavalry raiding supply depots, tearing up tracks, and clashing with Confederate defenders. Though Confederates quickly repaired the railroad, the damage was done: the Union had the momentum.

Clayton County was left ravaged—its homes burned, farms trampled, and communities devastated. For formerly enslaved people, the end of the war meant legal freedom but little protection from the hostility that followed.

RECONSTRUCTION AND THE RISE OF JIM CROW

After emancipation, many Black families in Clayton remained, working as sharecroppers or tenant farmers. Legally free, they were nonetheless bound to the land through debt and unfair contracts that kept them in poverty.

Reconstruction brought a brief period of political engagement, but by the late 1800s, Jim Crow laws cemented segregation. Schools, transportation, and public facilities were divided by race. Black residents were denied the vote through poll taxes, literacy tests, and intimidation.

Violence and terror enforced this order. Lynchings and racial attacks were not uncommon across Georgia, and the ever-present threat of violence hung over Clayton's Black communities.

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SEGREGATION, WHITE FLIGHT, AND SHIFTING DEMOGRAPHICS

By the mid-20th century, Clayton County faced new waves of change. In the 1950s and 1960s, desegregation orders reached local schools. Resistance was fierce. As integra-



“
Clayton is more than its scars—it is a living testament that even on contested soil, people can plant roots, create culture, and shape the future.
 ”

tion slowly took hold, many white families fled in what came to be called “white flight,” relocating to neighboring Fayette and Henry counties and taking investment and tax revenue with them.

Clayton’s demographics shifted rapidly: once majority white, it became majority Black within a generation. But the county was left to wrestle with underfunded schools, struggling infrastructure, and a tarnished reputation, fueled by media portrayals of crime and decline.

In 2008, the county made national headlines when its school system lost accreditation due to governance and ethics scandals—the first U.S. district in nearly 40 years to face such a penalty. Accreditation was later restored, but the stigma lingered, reflecting long-standing challenges tied to inequity and disinvestment.

THE LEGACY OF RACISM TODAY

The legacies of slavery, Jim Crow, and systemic racism continue to shape Clayton County.

- Economic inequality: Despite being home to Hartsfield–Jackson, the world’s busiest airport, Clayton remains one of the lower-income counties in metro Atlanta.
- Reputation & perception: Stereotypes paint Clayton as unsafe or “declining,” ignoring the resilience and cultural vibrancy of its communities.
- Ongoing barriers: Disparities in schools, housing, and health-care mirror patterns set in place generations ago.

Clayton County’s story is not just one of battles and growth—it is a history marked by displacement, exploitation, and resistance. From the Creek people driven off their homeland, to enslaved Africans whose labor built its wealth, to Black families who endured Jim Crow and fought for civil rights, Clayton’s past is full of hard truths.

Facing them does not diminish the county’s identity—it enriches it. To know Clayton is to acknowledge that its present-day diversity and resilience were born of struggle. Its people carry not only the scars of injustice but also the strength of survival.

TRIUMPH, CULTURE, AND COMMUNITY POWER

Despite displacement and racism, Clayton County’s Black community has continuously built, led, and redefined the county’s identity. What survives here is not only the memory of struggle, but the evidence of triumph.

From teachers who kept classrooms alive during segregation to today’s administrators and board members, Black educators in Clayton have been pillars of stability. The county’s recovery from the 2008 accreditation crisis is a story not just of governance reform, but of parents, students, and community leaders who demanded accountability and pushed the district forward. Clayton State University now stands as a symbol of academic access, research, and cultural growth in South Metro Atlanta.

Clayton has produced artists, athletes, and innovators whose voices reach far beyond county lines. Hip-hop star Latto, NFL athletes, and countless entrepreneurs call Clayton home. Local cultural festivals, mural projects, and grassroots arts collectives prove that creativity thrives here. Jonesboro’s historic downtown and Forest Park’s cultural corridors now reflect a blend of old and new—evidence of Black creativity literally painted onto the walls of the county.

CIVIC AND POLITICAL STRENGTH

Clayton voters have played outsized roles in shaping Georgia politics, including the 2020 election when record Black voter turnout helped shift the national balance of power. Locally, Black officials and civic leaders sit at the center of decision-making—from school boards and city councils to the county commission. This representation was fought for, and it continues to reshape the county’s trajectory.

Though inequities remain, Clayton is a hub for international travel and commerce with Hartsfield–Jackson Airport within its borders. Black-owned businesses—from restaurants and real estate firms to tech startups and media outlets—are growing and gaining recognition. Efforts in tourism, logistics, and healthcare show that the county is not simply surviving but innovating.

CLOSING BALANCE

C Clayton County’s history is heavy with loss and injustice, but its present is proof of resilience and creativity. To tell the story fully means not only recounting displacement, slavery, and segregation, but also amplifying the power of communities that turned survival into growth.

Clayton is more than its scars—it is a living testament that even on contested soil, people can plant roots, create culture, and shape the future. ✖



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A Lifelong Love Affair with Clayton County

Barbara Casey Lane is Passionate about Growing Her Community

**By Michael Booth
Photo By Richard A. Evans**

75

We Are Rooted ::

September - November 2025



Barbara Casey Lane has a love for Clayton County and her business, Low Temp Industries (LTI), that permeates the soul and fuels the heart. It is a love fostered by four generations of the Casey family's involvement in the company's and community's growth and expansion, including the establishment of a local bank, support for the local hospital, and backing the creation of the Clayton County Water Authority, a vital part of the county's progress.

76

We Are Rooted ::
September - November 2025



Photo By Richard A. Evans

Barbara Casey on the warehouse floor of LTI, where teamwork and dedication drive results.



“My family has always been involved in this community. We’re a citizen of this community, and we want to invest in this community and see it flourish,” she said. “My faith is very deep that we will see a community transformed.”

It began when the 15-year-old Morrow High School student started riding to work with her father, Bill Casey, who followed in the footsteps of his father, William B. Casey, one of the founders of the company. Her great aunt Bertha Hammonds, the Secretary-Treasurer for the company, brought the teenager into her office and soon she learned how the financial books were kept, how to process invoices, and how to interact with the bank.

“I learned so much from her. It was wonderful to come in and work with my family,” said Casey Lane. “Then, at the dinner table every night, I would listen as the family talked business. I cherished every second.”

When she was 18, the industry began to move toward the digital age of today. She was sent to take computer classes in north Atlanta. She was taught the basics at Xerox headquarters in Atlanta and brought new processes back to LTI.

“The aging workforce was nervous about the new technology. I had the opportunity to teach everyone how to use it. It helped me develop my people skills and the importance of introducing change,” said Casey Lane.

Rather than hone her business skills in college, Casey Lane became an English major at the University of Georgia, where her life would change forever. There she met and married Tim Lane, a seminary student who would go on to become a pastoral counselor specializing in mar-

riage therapy and author of several books, including *Unstuck and Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*.

After their marriage, Barbara and Tim moved to Philadelphia, where he received his doctorate from Westminster Theological Seminary in Counseling. It was in the City of Brotherly Love the couple started a family that would eventually number four children.

“I kid my husband that I never heard one of his sermons because I was always in the back minding four kids,” she said.

The family would spend the next quarter century living in Philadelphia and Clemson, South Carolina. It was a good life, yet Casey Lane felt a void. At times, she would miss her family, miss LTI, and miss Clayton County.

“I would grieve about leaving the community,” she said. “It was hard to leave my family and Low Temp. We would come back for family reunions and other times, but it wasn’t the same. I was so happy to be married but it was a grieving process.”

With his daughter still in Philadelphia, Bill Casey talked to her on the phone regularly, urging her to come back to LTI and use her business skills to keep the business in the family. In 2013, she listened to her heart and returned to the company.

Since 1947, when the company moved to Jonesboro, it has expanded from a five-person operation to 145 employees manufacturing custom counters and other food service equipment. In 2012, LTI introduced QuickSwitch technology, which allows independently controlled food wells to switch between hot, cold, and frozen in an hour or less. This innovation remains popular among LTI customers.

About 70% of LTI’s business is school food service, specifically kindergarten through 12th grade, with sales to other industries such as corporate, healthcare, military and collegiate dining. At her beloved University of Georgia, LTI builds serving lines for almost every dining hall on campus.

“We have been called the Rolls Royce of the industry, and we don’t take that lightly. For nearly 80 years people have trusted us,” said Casey Lane. “We are making products



“
Many family-
owned companies
are gone by the
third generation.
I am just
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loving it.”

that are easier to use. We’re here and we’re committed to staying.”

Through the years, the company spread its manufacturing out among seven buildings, each with its own machinery and processes. Casey Lane oversaw the completion of a brand new LTI building in 2018, bringing all the production under one roof for the most part. The facility has 156,000 square feet of production space, 16,000 square feet of office space, and 10 loading docks.

The building features, among other specialties, a welding room, a metal grinding room, and a specialized woodshop. It boasts an industrial laser for custom metal work.

“I love to go out to the shop floor to clear my head,” said Casey Lane, opening the door to the production area. “The production floor is loud and bustling with innovation, and it is wonderful.”

In honor of her family’s community sponsorship, the road connecting Tara Boulevard and Main Street, where the LTI building sits, was named Bill Casey Parkway.

LTI maintains all its original buildings that Casey Lane wants to turn into a man-

ufacturing incubator. “We want to bring jobs to this community by creating an inspiring and welcoming manufacturing atmosphere. This is one small way to be a part of making Clayton County stronger for the future,” said Casey Lane.

Even when Bill Casey went into hospice care, his final conversations with her were centered on the business. She remembers having long chats at his bedside that were business-oriented up to the end.

“He told me to take care of the people of Low Temp. He wanted me to assure him that we would be part of a thriving community, always. I wish I still had my dad to ask questions to, and I am thankful for those last days,” she said.

The company is currently hiring as part of its ongoing expansion. Now in her fourth year as CEO and Chairman of the Board, Casey Lane is pleased that her sister, sons and a niece have joined the company.

“Many family-owned companies are gone by the third generation. I am just hitting my stride,” she said while standing in front of a display showing the history of LTI. “I’m loving it.” ❀

PHOTO ON NEXT PAGE

The LTI team standing strong together under the leadership of CEO Barbara Casey Lane—Rockin’ & Rollin’ into the future with pride, purpose, and community spirit.

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TABLE TALK



Photo By Richard A. Evans

From Web Pages to Front Porches:

How Santia Fox Built a Life of Design, Business,
and Community in Jonesboro

By Gerrian Hawes

LIVING IN CLAYTON



Santia Fox relaxes in her Jonesboro historic home — a space where heritage meets modern elegance. Photo by Richard Anthony Evans

IN

Jonesboro, Georgia, there's a familiar face who seems to be everywhere — walking clients through their dream homes, transforming a room into a showpiece, or welcoming guests into one of her Airbnb properties.

Her name is Santia Fox, and she's not just in the business of real estate or design — she's in the business of building lives.

"The foundation of a family is built within their home."

It's the thread that runs through every chapter of her story — from her early career in tech to her thriving work in real estate, interior design, and short-term rentals.

A Career Pivot with Purpose

Before she was matching families with the perfect home, Fox was matching color palettes and code in the world of web design. She loved the creativity and problem-solving that came with designing websites, but she wanted something more tangible.

"I've always been drawn to real estate," she says. "When I transitioned

from tech, I saw an opportunity to help families find that foundational piece of the American Dream."

Her background in web design wasn't left behind — it gave her a strong advantage. "Web design was a masterclass in communication. It taught me how to listen closely to a client's vision, respect their time, and turn their needs into something functional and beautiful. I use those same skills in real estate and design every single day."

Design with a Personal Touch

If you ask her about her interior design style, she'll tell you there isn't one — at least not in the traditional sense.

"My inspiration comes from my clients," she explains. "I want to know what makes them smile, what excites them, and what statement they want their home to make. Because every client is unique, every design is intentionally different."

This approach is earning her a loyal following in her community, where homeowners trust her to create spaces that don't just look beautiful but feel deeply personal.

Turning Empty Spaces into Opportunities

Her entry into Airbnb hosting wasn't a calculated business move — it was a natural progression.

"Unused properties aren't productive," she says. "Listing them on Airbnb gave visitors a place to stay while supporting our local economy."

But she doesn't see it as a side hustle. "Airbnb is a business. You're solving a problem for travelers while also taking responsibility for how your hosting impacts the community. It's about integrity."

Real Estate: The City's Heartbeat

Santia has a deep understanding of how the real estate market shapes a city's health.

"When the housing market struggles, the effects ripple through everything — schools, businesses, even crime rates. Homes are the bedrock of a community."

She balances her creative instincts with clear business strategy, knowing there's a time for inspiration and a time for execution. "The trick is knowing which moment you're in."

Pride in Place

While she's proud of her sales and design transformations, the real reward is closer to home.

"I'm proud of the relationships I've built here in Jonesboro. This is one of the most diverse and welcoming communities I've ever lived in. Watching my sons grow up here alongside my business — that's a blessing."

"My work doesn't just contribute to the city's transformation — it reflects it."

Her success, she says, is directly linked to Jonesboro's growth. "We'll grow together." ❀

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RECIPE ROOM

Dish & Dialogue:

Where Stories and Recipes Are Served

By Chef Jeff Kirby

T

he holidays are about more than lights, gifts, and decorations—they're about gathering. In every family, the kitchen is where the best stories live. Whether it's the smell of cinnamon drifting from the oven, the laughter of children sneaking tastes before dinner, or the clink of dishes on a full table, food has a way of pulling us together.

This fall, as we move from the playful chills of Halloween into the gratitude of Thanksgiving, *Recipe Room* celebrates the recipes that bring

comfort and joy. These are invitations—to pause, savor, and create traditions that last long after the plates are cleared.

Halloween is a time when the kitchen becomes a workshop for whimsy. Candy bowls overflow, caramel scents drift through the air, and laughter bubbles up as families prepare treats together. One simple way to make the evening extra special is with *Pumpkin Patch Cupcakes*—spiced cupcakes topped with cream cheese frosting and a candy “pumpkin.” They're as fun to decorate as they are to eat, and they add a festive touch to any gathering.

As October fades into November, the spirit shifts. Thanksgiving invites us to slow down, gather at long tables, and share not only food but gratitude. For many, the holiday isn't complete without a dish that warms the heart and sparks memories. One such recipe is *Brown Sugar Pecan Sweet Potatoes*—a comforting side with just the right balance of sweetness and crunch. It's a dish that feels like tradition on every forkful.

And then, of course, there's dessert. Thanksgiving meals often end with pie, but if you're looking for something simple and sharable, try *Autumn Spiced Apple Crisp*. With warm apples, a crunchy oat topping, and a scoop of vanilla ice cream, it brings the flavors of the season to life in a way that always draws people back for seconds.

These recipes are more than instructions on a page—they're pieces of celebration. They remind us that food isn't just fuel; it's memory, tradition, and connection. This season, may your kitchen be filled with both flavors and stories worth sharing. ❀

Pumpkin Patch Cupcakes

Ingredients:

- 1 ½ cups flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- ½ tsp baking soda
- ½ tsp salt
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp nutmeg
- ½ tsp ginger
- ½ cup vegetable oil
- 1 cup sugar
- 2 large eggs
- 1 cup pumpkin purée
- 1 tsp vanilla extract

Frosting & Topping:

- 8 oz cream cheese, softened
- 4 tbsp butter, softened
- 2 cups powdered sugar
- 1 tsp vanilla extract
- Candy pumpkins or candy corn for garnish

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line a muffin pan with cupcake liners.
2. In a bowl, whisk flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and spices.
3. In another bowl, mix oil, sugar, eggs, pumpkin, and vanilla. Stir in dry ingredients until combined.

4. Fill liners ¾ full and bake 18–20 minutes, until a toothpick comes out clean. Cool completely.

5. Beat cream cheese, butter, powdered sugar, and vanilla until smooth. Frost cupcakes.
6. Top each with a candy pumpkin for a festive touch.

Brown Sugar Pecan Sweet Potatoes

Ingredients:

- 4 medium sweet potatoes, baked and peeled
- 4 tbsp butter
- ½ cup brown sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp nutmeg
- 1 cup chopped pecans

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 9x9-inch baking dish.
2. Mash sweet potatoes in a large bowl. Stir in butter, brown sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg until smooth.
3. Spread mixture evenly in the baking dish.
4. Sprinkle pecans on top.
5. Bake for 25 minutes, until

golden and bubbling at the edges. Serve warm.

Autumn Spiced Apple Crisp

Ingredients (Filling):

- 6 apples, peeled, cored, and sliced
- 2 tbsp lemon juice
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp nutmeg

Ingredients (Topping):

- 1 cup rolled oats
- ½ cup flour
- ½ cup brown sugar
- ½ cup butter, cold and cubed

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Grease a 9x13-inch baking dish.
2. In a bowl, toss apples with lemon juice, sugar, cinnamon, and nutmeg. Spread in baking dish.
3. In another bowl, combine oats, flour, and brown sugar. Cut in butter until mixture is crumbly.
4. Sprinkle topping over apples.
5. Bake 40–45 minutes, until apples are tender and topping is golden brown.
6. Serve warm with ice cream or whipped cream.



STORYTIME



The Warren House: Haunted History on Mimosa Drive

By Amanda White,
Clayton State University, English Major

Jonesboro, Georgia, is known for its Southern charm and Civil War roots—but few places in the county hold as much whispered fear as the Warren House on Mimosa Drive. Built in 1840 by railroad magnate George Lightfoot Warren, the stately Greek Revival home has seen war, death, and centuries of secrets. During the Battle of Jonesborough in 1864, Union troops commandeered the home as a military headquarters and field hospital. It is said that the upstairs rooms became blood-soaked wards where soldiers took their last breaths—some crying for their mothers, some scratching their names into the walls so they wouldn't be forgotten.

Those names still exist. Visitors and contractors have reported seeing the ghostly etchings of Civil War soldiers fade in and out of the old plaster. The most persistent of them is one Private R. Sullivan, whose name appears upstairs near the east-facing window. Those who have spent time in the Warren House speak of footsteps when no one's there, cold spots on warm days, and a looming sense that someone—or something—is watching. Some locals say the house is more than haunted. They say it's waiting.

Every October, the stories swell like fog. Teenagers dare each other to sneak into the yard at night. Paranormal investigators come with cameras and leave with little more than goosebumps and corrupted footage. And yet... the tale that keeps coming back is one passed along in whispers. The tale of a girl, a camera, and a soldier who never left his post.



A SAFETY MESSAGE BROUGHT TO YOU BY SOUTH ATLANTA MEDIA, INC.

From Costumes to Candy: A Safer Halloween for All

Halloween in Clayton County is a time of excitement—costumes come alive, porches glow with jack-o'-lanterns, and children fill the streets with laughter. But with the fun comes the need for safety. Each year, emergency rooms see an uptick in preventable accidents, from trips and falls to pedestrian incidents. With a little preparation, families can enjoy a night that's both festive and safe.

Visibility is key. Many costumes are dark and blend into the night, making trick-or-treaters hard for drivers to see. Adding reflective tape, glow sticks, or simply carrying a flashlight helps children stand out. Parents should also remind kids to use sidewalks and crosswalks instead of darting across streets.

Comfort and fit matter too. Long costumes or oversized shoes can quickly lead to trips on sidewalks and steps. Before heading out, check that costumes are the right length and that masks don't block vision. Face paint can often be a safer, more comfortable choice than a full mask.

Traveling in groups is always safer. Children should never trick-or-treat alone, and parents of younger kids should plan routes in familiar neighborhoods. Homes with porch lights on are the best indicator that trick-or-treaters are welcome. Remind kids never to enter a stranger's house, even if invited.

Of course, no Halloween is complete without candy. Parents should inspect treats before little ones dig in—look for tampered packaging or unfamiliar items. Setting a rule to wait until after the route is finished not only ensures safety but also prevents sugar rushes mid-walk.

Halloween also affects more than just people—pets can be startled by costumes, constant doorbell rings, or roaming groups. Keeping them inside helps avoid accidental escapes or stress. Drivers, too, play a role by slowing down in residential areas where children are likely to be crossing.

Halloween should be a time of joy, imagination, and memory-making. By staying rooted in community awareness and safety, families can ensure the night is filled with treats, not tricks from unexpected accidents. With these precautions, Clayton County can enjoy a Halloween that's as safe as it is spooky.



Ja'Don Hawes lens:

The Mundy family graves stand silent, rooted in history and shadow—Clayton County's resting past meeting the eerie spirit of Halloween.



Illustration AI Generated

“Bone-Chill at Mimosa Drive” A Halloween Story Inspired by True Jonesboro Legends

By Amanda White

Taylor didn't believe in ghosts. She believed in lighting, framing, and going viral. A photography student at Clayton State, she'd made a name for herself shooting eerie, abandoned homes in South Atlanta. But the Warren House? That was different. It wasn't the fact that was abandoned. It was... resistant. Like the house itself didn't want to be seen too clearly.

Still, she was intrigued. The soldier's name—Private R. Sullivan—was mentioned in every article, every ghost blog, every blurred TikTok. A Union soldier who supposedly died in the east wing, still waiting for a rescue that never came. She figured it was just Civil War cosplay for the

overly imaginative. Still, she packed her Canon, a flashlight, and one battery pack “just in case.”

It was nearly midnight when she stepped onto the cracked porch. The air was still, unnaturally so. The oaks surrounding the property didn't rustle, didn't sway. They stood like sentries. Taylor pushed open the back door—it creaked open like a movie cliché—and stepped inside.

The interior smelled like mold and metal. Her flashlight beam hit the old stairs, walls, and... the names. Dozens of them. Scratched into the plaster, some in pencil, others in faded charcoal. Her camera clicked. One name froze her:

R. Sullivan. Co. A. 52nd Illinois.

Right above it, a small handprint, child-sized.

She shivered and climbed the staircase, each step groaning like it was waking up. The upstairs hallway stretched before her, empty but not quiet. There was a hum—a low sound, not quite wind, not quite mechanical. Her heart thumped in her throat. She raised her flashlight.

A shadow crossed at the end of the hall. Taylor froze.

“Who's there?” she said, too loudly. Her voice bounced off the walls.

No response. Just the creaking of a slow, deliberate step. Then another. And another.

She turned to run—but the door to the stairs slammed shut behind her.

She screamed, pushing against it, but it wouldn't budge. The air thickened. She turned and saw him. The outline of a man, dressed in a Civil War coat, tall, eyes sunken. He didn't move. He didn't breathe. Just stood at the end of the hall, staring. His face—barely visible—twitched into a grin.

She fumbled for her phone. No signal. She snapped a picture—anything to prove she wasn't hallucinating.

Flash.

Nothing there.

But when she lowered the phone, he was inches from her face.

Everything went black.

They found Taylor hours later, wandering down Mimosa Drive barefoot, muttering something about a window. Her camera? Smashed. Phone? Dead. When she finally spoke clearly, she said only this:

“He's still up there. Waiting. For someone to remember.”

That night, the town went quiet. No one dared speak the soldier's name aloud.

But every Halloween, someone new tries. A dare. A thrill. A mistake.

And sometimes—just sometimes—neighbors say they see the face of a soldier staring from the Warren House's upstairs window.

Waiting. Watching. Still loyal to a war that ended 160 years ago.

OCTOBER

Breast Cancer

AWARENESS

think pink

To every woman and man who has faced the words “You have breast cancer,” we see you. We honor your strength, your fight, and your unshakable spirit. Survivorship is not just about overcoming disease—it is about living boldly, loving deeply, and inspiring others through resilience.

Breast cancer survivors are more than fighters; they are teachers of perseverance. They remind us that hope is not fragile, but rooted—rooted in family, rooted in community, rooted in faith, and rooted in the determination to rise above fear.

Your journeys have shown Clayton County, and the world, that survivorship is not the end of a story, but the beginning of a new chapter. One filled with gratitude, advocacy, and the power to reach back and uplift those just beginning their own fight.

This month, and every month, We Are Clayton Magazine salutes you. We celebrate your milestones, honor your scars as badges of courage, and walk beside you in solidarity. Your strength gives us strength. Your hope fuels our hope. Your courage reminds us that together—we are rooted in life, in love, and in community.

To all survivors: thank you for showing us what it means to live rooted in resilience.

Out & About

Faces, Places, and Moments That Matter



Michie Turpin

This snapshot, taken more than a decade ago for *We Are Clayton Magazine* 1.0, features publisher Gerrian Hawes with the owners of the beloved Ann & Bill's Restaurant in Forest Park. For years, Ann & Bill's was more than a place to eat — it was a community gathering spot where neighbors, friends, and leaders came together over good food and conversation. Though the restaurant has since closed its doors, the photo captures the welcoming spirit and local pride that continue to define Clayton County.









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MAGAZINE

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BECAUSE EVERY ENDING IS THE START OF ANOTHER STORY.

THE LAST LINE

And here's the truth: every story in these pages is not mine alone. They belong to you—neighbors who show up, elders who steady us, and everyday kindnesses that remind us why our community endures. What you've just read is not a collection of headlines, but proof of connection, woven together issue by issue.

Looking ahead, our next issue—We Are Resilient—will carry that proof forward. We'll celebrate the victory of Clayton County Public Schools with Superintendent Dr. Anthony Smith, and we'll hear from the man beside Chairwoman Dr. Alika Anderson Henry, Steve Henry.

The Last Line isn't an ending—it's a pause, a breath, and a reminder that another chapter is already waiting. Until we meet again in the pages ahead, may you keep noticing the stories unfolding around you—and perhaps even write one worth sharing.

I'd also love to hear from you. Write a letter to the publisher and tell us what this issue stirred in you. Your reflections don't just matter—they help shape the stories we tell next.

Gerrian Hawes
Founder, Publisher & Editor-in-Chief

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THE NAME

When Coca-Cola retired its mascot, Sprite Boy, in 1958, it repurposed the name for its new beverage in 1961.

THE FLAVOR

Originally marketed as “naturally tart” and not too sweet, Sprite’s lemon-lime combo fit the bill.

THE COLOR

Green bottles help protect beverages from sunlight, but consumers also associate the color with refreshment.