



ILLUSTRATION BY SHANCHEZE JOHNSON / THE SIGNAL

Are we ignoring a piece of civil rights history?

75 Piedmont is a part of Atlanta's legacy

JIMMY FREELS

Staff Columnist

Because Georgia State University is part of downtown Atlanta, the university has had to acquire various buildings that were originally owned by other companies, repurposing them to create this urban campus. One of Georgia State's buildings is the 75 Piedmont building. Now it includes university offices such as the Center for Leadership in Disability and the Georgia State Office of Student Housing. In the past, this building has been home to offices for the American Civil Liberties Union, Planned Parenthood and U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Relation Service created by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But did you know that this iconic building was an important part of Atlanta's history and the Civil Rights Movement? 75 Piedmont was originally the Citizens Trust Bank building, the first African-American owned bank in Atlanta. Citizens Trust Bank was established in 1921 by Heman Perry and four other men known as the "fervent five." The bank was originally located on Auburn Avenue and became the first African American owned bank to become a member of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation during the Great Depression when many banks went under. In the 1950s, Citizens Trust Bank invested in the development of several subdivisions in southwest Atlanta helping many African-Americans become homeowners as well as helping finance African-Americans purchasing homes in white neighborhoods. Citizens Trust Bank worked closely with

Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the fight for civil rights.

By the mid 1960s Citizens Trust Bank had outgrown its Auburn Avenue location and decided to build at 75 Piedmont. The bank moved into its new headquarters in 1969, putting the bank on the same block as the famous Atlanta Life Insurance Company. The Citizens Trust building stood as a statement of progress in Atlanta for many years, reminding everyone of where Atlanta came from and where it is going. In 2007 Citizens Trust Bank sold the 75 Piedmont building to Georgia State as the bank moved to a new location on Peachtree Street. Georgia State also acquired the Atlanta Life Insurance building. Now the university has been entrusted with these two historic buildings, but what is the university doing to preserve the buildings and their stories?

When you walk up the stairs to come in the front door of 75 Piedmont, you will see almost 40 photographs on the wall of well-known figures from Atlanta's struggle for civil rights. These pictures include the faces of, the bank's founder Heman Perry, Alonzo Herndon, Martin Luther King, Jr., Joseph Lowery and many other civil rights leaders. It is a collection of important people, but the display is where few people see it. Many people working in or visiting the building park in the adjacent parking garage and enter the building through the garage near the elevators--missing the photo display completely. The display does captures a significant time in Atlanta's history, but the display does not seem to be presented in a significant manner. The photos are simply mounted, hanging on the wall in no particular order, without any explanation or information of the people or events. These people and events changed American society as we know it, and no one knows they are there.

This collection, as well as the history of the Citizens Trust Bank building, are not in a proper display. The photos and this building, or at least part of the building, should be preserved and presented as a museum honoring Atlanta's rich heritage of fighting for equal rights. Why is something this important being virtually ignored? This building should be a focal point for not only Georgia State students, but also for Atlanta residents and visitors. This place should be treated with respect and dignity, honoring those who fought for equal rights for all. We should be celebrating this history, but we are not.

I know a little about this building because I am a student in the Inclusive Digital Expression and Literacy program, an inclusive education program at Georgia State, that meets in 75 Piedmont. The Center for Leadership in Disability oversees the IDEAL program, and its office is in 75 Piedmont as well. Ironically, I have never actually gotten to see the display of photographs. I have been describing even though I have been going to 75 Piedmont every week for two years. I have only seen a picture of the collection. The display is at the entrance to the front doors of the building between two short flights of steps. I cannot come in through the front door of the building and I cannot go up or down the steps to see the display because I am in a power wheelchair. There is no ramp at the front of the building; the only way I can enter is through the back door of the building on a small ramp built by Kenley's Restaurant.

This building and the photo display deserve to be honored not disregarded. And they both deserve to fully accessible for all people to experience. We should be celebrating our civil rights history not throwing it aside. Doesn't the Citizens Trust Bank building and its legacy deserve more respect than it is currently getting from Georgia State? I for one think it does.