

'Old' Savannah High School being honored with historical marker

In 1937, when Savannah High School was dedicated at 500 Washington Ave., it was the largest high school in Georgia. A history of the school offers these bits of trivia: the distance around the perimeter of the building is just under a quarter of a mile and "Gone With the Wind" could have been written in its entirety on the 12,800 square feet of chalkboard.

From a student's viewpoint, Mary McPeters Price, who graduated in Savannah High's June 1938 class, the building was "gleaming and shiny."

"It was thrilling and wonderful that we could have such a school," she recalled. (Prior to the opening of the new school, Savannah High was at 208 Bull St., where the school system's administrative offices are now.)

Getting to and from school "required some ingenuity" because most students were accustomed to walking, said Mrs. Price, whose family lived near Forsyth Park. "My sister taught at Romana Riley and had the car so she took me," she recalled.

Mrs. Price was especially excited when Savannah High Principal John Varnedoe gave his permission for a girl's basketball team — the first ever at the school. "He said yes if we could find an advisor."

Teacher Mabel Bryant was recruited as advisor and the girls began practicing in the school gym, which had been missing from the school's downtown location.

Memorable teachers included Ellie Freedman and Lola Stevens, who led the Glee Club, which performed at the dedication.

Savannah High was built on the site of what was supposed to be a grand hotel that, literally, never got off the ground.

When plans for the hotel went kaput, the Board of Education took over the property and built what was then "new" Savannah High with WPA funds. The cost of the project was approximately \$900,000. An even newer SHS was built in the 1990s on Pennsylvania Avenue and the Washington Avenue building is now home to the Savannah Arts Academy.

To many of those who attended the school at 500 Washington Ave., the building will always be Savannah High, which is what the historical marker will say when it is unveiled at 4 p.m. June 2.

All former students, staff, administrators and other interested persons are invited to celebrate the unveiling of the marker to honor the 66-year-old history of the school building. Speakers will include state Rep. Tom Bordeaux and Brig. Gen. Walter E. Gaskin, both SHS graduates. The event is co-sponsored by the Georgia



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Historical Society and the Savannah Arts Academy Foundation.

Beginning at 2:30 p.m. classic cars will be on display and music will be provided by the Savannah Arts Academy's Sky-elite Jazz Band and Ben Tucker.

When the building was dedicated in 1937 the Morning News described the ceremony as "appropriate exercises which marked the long-sought culmination of a civic dream for adequate facilities for the education of boys and girls."

Interestingly enough, before the school was moved to Washington Avenue, the powers that be considered changing the name to James E. Oglethorpe High School. Again the Morning News editors commented: "It would have been a grievous mistake to have given the new school the name of any individual. It is in every respect a Savannah institution and as such should bear the name of the city it is to serve so magnificently."

Reunion News

The SHS Class of 1956 is hosting a river boat cruise Saturday, May 4, at 6 p.m. For information, call Walt Dahlgren at (864) 282-9783.

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