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Atlanta lawsuit spotlights obscure black community

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ATLANTA -- Ed Daugherty remembers passing the graveled streets, modest homes and painted white church in Macedonia Park as a teenager on his way to school.

Now 82, Daugherty is among the dwindling number of Atlantans who still remember the black enclave once nestled in the city's affluent Buckhead neighborhood. The community embodied a bygone but common custom here, typical of many clusters of convenience in the South where black workers lived close to the white families for whom they worked.

Macedonia Park was both a product and a casualty of its time. When nearby white residents decided to build a park, they forced their black neighbors out and razed the subdivision, leveling the homes and the church of Daugherty's boyhood.

Today, all that remains is Mt. Olive Cemetery, the last vestige of a community many Atlantans have never heard of. A woman whose grandparents are buried there is suing to save the cemetery from a developer seeking to move the graves to turn a profit.

In a city where black history usually calls to mind the lives of civil rights leaders, the lawsuit is bringing attention to a less known facet of that history: the quiet struggles that everyday people endured during segregation.

"Atlanta and Buckhead have been shaped by lots of different hands," said Christine McCauley, executive director of the Buckhead Heritage

Society. "Nobody's role in it is more important than the other. This really is the very last remnant of that community."

Former slaves settled Macedonia Park as tenant farmers. A white developer built a subdivision of modest homes there in the 1920s. Its residents likely worked in the homes of their white neighbors, a fairly typical development pattern in Atlanta, said Larry Keating, author of "Atlanta: Race, Class and Urban Expansion."

The relationship was a mutually convenient one in a burgeoning residential area, Daugherty said.

"Back then, your servants lived nearby if they could," he explained. "It was an efficient and hopefully, a happy relationship for everyone involved."

The neighborhood had dozens of homes, as well as two grocery stores, restaurants and a blacksmith. There were also three churches, including Mt. Olive Methodist Episcopal and its adjacent cemetery.

By the mid 1940s, Macedonia Park's white neighbors wanted to build a public park on the land. The residents were bought out, using threats, eminent domain and other means to get them off the property, Keating said.

And by the early 1950s, Macedonia Park was no more. In its place, the county built Bagley Park, named for a well-respected black businessman and resident of Buckhead, William Bagley. The park became home to a neighborhood baseball program and in 1980 was renamed for Frankie Allen, a popular, white, baseball umpire in the league.

Over the years, the memory of the community was also figuratively buried at Mt. Olive.

"How many people are aware of the fact that Buckhead was dotted

with small African American enclaves?" Keating said. "Preserving the cemetery speaks to the fact that people lived and died there and lost their community." More than 100 people are thought to be buried there.

The lawsuit filed on behalf of Elon Butts Osby - Bagley's granddaughter - against developer Brandon Marshall is pending in Fulton County Superior Court. Osby's attorneys argue that the site is a public cemetery that should never have been sold. Marshall told a judge the site is a private cemetery and that moving the remains to a "more proper" cemetery would show the appropriate respect for the deceased.

Cemeteries are tax-exempt under Georgia law, but Mt. Olive was improperly classified by the county as a vacant lot and sold to Marshall at a public auction after the taxes went unpaid. A city ordinance says public cemeteries cannot be moved, although private ones can be.

Marshall declined to comment for this story. Wright Mitchell, who is Osby's attorney and also serves as Buckhead Heritage Society president, said Marshall is in the process of trying to get a permit to move the cemetery and has submitted an application to the city's urban design commission for approval. The commission makes a recommendation to the city council, which votes to grant or deny the permit.

It was not immediately clear how Marshall plans to develop the property.

Osby testified at an injunction hearing that she doesn't want her grandparents, uncle or the others buried at Mt. Olive relocated.

"It hurts to even think about your family members being dug up and moved somewhere," Osby said. "It interrupts the legacy."

It also buries an important part of Atlanta's legacy, said Sam Massell, former mayor of Atlanta and president of the Buckhead Coalition.

"It's part of our heritage, and it's up to us to defend it," Massell said.
"You don't have to be black to protect black history."