

Atlanta History Center

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It's safe to say that in its nine-decade history, the Atlanta History Center has never borrowed a phrase from a popular rap song for a marketing slogan. But there it was this spring on a billboard towering over Atlanta's I-75/85 Downtown Connector, in giant mint-colored letters sharing space with blown-up vintage buttons representing Hank Aaron, the Fox Theatre, and other Atlanta icons: "Do It for the Culture."

As part of a bold rebranding, the illuminated billboard lifted the line from a hit song by Atlanta rappers Migos. History museums aren't usually in the habit of referencing rap songs, but the Atlanta History Center is going through an unprecedented period of reinvention, clearing cobwebs from its image and projecting the daring notion that history can be, well, hip.

When the Federal Bar Association holds a reception on the Atlanta History Center's leafy 33-acre campus during its Atlanta Convention on Sept. 14, there will be other apparent recent changes and evidence of even more afoot.

Making a positive first impression, the cultural nonprofit unveiled a new, sophisticated, welcoming profile to the bustling north

Atlanta community of Buckhead in late 2015. Its main point of entry, the Atlanta History Museum, now features a large curved expanse of structural glass and limestone rising from a base of Georgia granite. The façade opens into an atrium with 30-foot-high ceilings that replaced a slightly dim and cramped train station-styled lobby. An allusion to Atlanta's railroading-fueled past, that look didn't fully reflect the city's more dynamic present, but the soaring, sunlight-filled new entrance does. And all that curved glass facing West Paces Ferry Road—an important stretch that connects the Buckhead business district with a high-end





residential area—is more than just attractive architecture.

The Atlanta History Museum's new entrance also symbolizes the History Center's push to be more welcoming and open, to better serve a growing and increasingly diverse metro area where natives, with their seasoned sense of the city's history, have long since been outnumbered by transplants.

"As our physical campus improvements continue to take shape, we want to be creative in exploring multiple ways the Atlanta History Center can connect with, and within, our communities," said Atlanta History Center President and CEO Sheffield Hale. "We want to do more than just engage visitors within our buildings; we want to find ways to foster opportunities to connect Atlantans on a daily basis and perhaps surprise them a little along the way."

Beyond the new 5,300-square-foot Allen Atrium, which provides a needed orientation point for guests to the History Center's multifaceted offerings as well as a large, comfortable pre-event function space for special events and rental clients, more surprises await.

The year-old permanent exhibition Gatheround: Stories of Atlanta explores the city's rich history through stories about Atlantans of different backgrounds. The stories include not just those of the expected high-profile political leaders, but also those of the unsung everyday citizens who contributed to the city's progress in modest ways.

A highlight is the set-like interactive spaces where Meet the Past museum theatre performances are offered on weekends, helping visitors understand and appreciate the people, institutions, and events that shape the stories of Atlanta. Addae Moon, the History Center's director of Museum Theatre, wrote or helped orchestrate narratives for actors portraying seven notable Atlantans, including Rosalyn Walton of the Atlanta Nine, the students who desegregated Atlanta Public Schools; John M. Slaton, the Georgia governor who commuted Leo Frank's death sentence; and Eli Sotto, a Greek Holocaust survivor who ran a barbershop for six decades in Midtown Atlanta.

Visitors to Gatheround are greeted by a lively seven-minute

introductory video, with appearances by notable current and former Atlantans, including Mayor Kasim Reed, Martin Luther King Jr., the Indigo Girls, and Victoria Huynh of the Center for Pan Asian Community Services, all sharing perspectives on what makes Atlanta unique.

Gatheround curator Calinda Lee explained the exhibition's intentionally democratic approach: "We do talk about transformational political leaders, but in talking about them we also have to think about the people who voted them in. That consideration is crucial in completing the conventional 'great man' history. You can't learn the meaning of wars just by looking at the biographies of the generals."

Some of the stories the exhibition explores are unblinkingly challenging, representing what Lee and other organizers term "flashpoints" in the city's history. They include the Atlanta Race Riot of 1906, the trial and 1915 lynching of Frank by an anti-Semitic mob; and the bombing of the Temple synagogue in 1958.

"There are hard stories in our past, and we need to recognize those, and we must talk openly about those," said Michael Rose, Atlanta History Center's executive vice president. "Some are hard stories that the city still struggles to overcome. We cannot understand one another unless we understand one another's past and how we remember history differently."

The exhibition also spotlights lesser-known but important chapters in Atlanta's story. These include the Washerwomen's Strike of 1881, when more than 3,000 African-American laundresses staged a work stoppage in a united fight for higher wages, a key early development in the American labor movement.

With the guiding principles that everyone has a story to tell and that history belongs to everyone, the exhibit urges guests to "gatheround" and share their own Atlanta stories in two recording booths located within the gallery.

And in an unexpectedly fun feature, guests also have the opportunity to "photobomb" themselves directly into Atlanta historical events, including an 1890s Georgia Tech football game, a 1960s

anti-establishment protest in Piedmont Park, or, more recently, the Dragon Con pop culture convention. They can then email the image to themselves as a keepsake.

In a gesture of hospitality for after-museum-hours visitors, the Gatheround gallery and the five galleries located off the exhibition hallway around the corner all remain open during special events. The other exhibitions that Federal Bar Association guests may partake of during their event include Turning Point: The American Civil War, Shaping Traditions: Folk Arts in a Changing South, Fair Play: The Bobby Jones Story, Native Lands: Indians and Georgia, and Uncle Sam Wants You! World War I and the American Poster.

The idea of keeping galleries open for function guests was CEO Hale's, who signaled a new era of openness when he took charge in 2012 by taking down a perimeter fence and gate that gave the center the feel of a locked-down fortress at night. Hale also eliminated a rule that forbade eventgoers from taking drinks into the galleries, a policy that left them lingering outside in the hallway.

"Our mission is to get people into the exhibits to see what we have, not to have them stand out in the hallway," Hale said. If there is a spill, he told the staff, maintenance can be called, adding, "That's part of the cost of doing business."

Although it will be closed during the Federal Bar Association event, you might notice the combined Atlanta History Center bookstore and Souper Jenny located diagonally across Allen Atrium from the Gatheround entrance café. For its first full-fledged eatery, Hale and other History Center leaders sought out the trendy chain that has built a loyal clientele with a menu of healthful soups, salads, and sandwiches. They persuaded owner Jenny Levison to move her flagship Buckhead location, though she was initially resistant, thinking the History Center too old-school to be a match for her young-spirit-ed enterprise.

It has turned out to be a good match: Not only has Souper Jenny's business mushroomed, but thousands of customers also have been introduced to the History Center, many returning to experience family-friendly events, exhibitions, the three historic homes (including the elegant 1928 Swan House, which had a role in a trio of "Hunger Games" films), and Kenan Research Center, all linked by the lush greenery of the 22-acre Goizueta Gardens.

Just beyond the bookstore-café, you'll notice a large round structure nearing completion, the Lloyd and Mary Ann Whitaker Cyclorama Building. It's the new home for the 1887 "Battle of Atlanta" cyclorama painting, which was moved to the Atlanta History Center after more than nine decades as an attraction in Grant Park, close to downtown Atlanta. The 359-foot-long, 42-foot-tall painting, which complements a Civil War collection at the History Center that is ranked as one of the country's best, is undergoing a major restoration. It will open to the public in fall 2018.

In the meantime, you will be able to glimpse an important related artifact: the 1856 Texas locomotive, well-known as well for its pivotal Civil War role in 1862's Great Locomotive Chase. The steam engine returned to Atlanta in May from the North Carolina Transportation Museum, where, for 16 months, it underwent its first major restoration.

The Texas and the General, the star attraction at the Southern Museum of Civil War and Locomotive History in Kennesaw, Ga., are the sole surviving locomotives that once served the Western and Atlantic Railroad (W&A), a company key in Atlanta's early development.

During the Great Locomotive Chase, Union Army loyalists commandeered the General from the town of Big Shanty (now Kennesaw). The interlopers drove it north toward Chattanooga, Tenn., wreaking destruction to the W&A line, until finally being caught by Confederate forces who had pursued aboard the Texas.

Though the Great Locomotive Chase became the subject of a 1926 Buster Keaton film and a popular 1956 Disney movie of the same name, as well as numerous books, Atlanta History Center historians believe the Texas has even greater importance as an artifact that speaks eloquently of Atlanta's beginnings.

Atlanta was established in 1837 as the terminus of the new railroad line that ran from what was then known as Terminus northwest to Chattanooga. The city grew up as a railroad town and burgeoned to become one of the nation's busiest transportation centers.

The Texas pulled passenger and freight trains in Atlanta and around North Georgia for 51 of the region's most formative years, retiring from service in 1907.

"We want to show it as the hardworking engine that it was," Atlanta History Center Senior Military Historian Gordon Jones said of the vision for the Texas' restoration and interpretation, "not just as one of the engines in the Great Locomotive Chase."

With the Texas, The Battle of Atlanta cyclorama painting, Gatheround: Stories of Atlanta and other exhibitions, historic homes, gardens, research center and more, the Atlanta History Center is posed to tell a more comprehensive story of Atlanta's past than ever before. But it does this all with eyes sharply trained on the future, as well.

The billboard didn't lie. The Atlanta History Center has complete commitment to "Do It for the Culture." ☉



Howard Pousner, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution arts editor and features reporter for 35 years, began work as the Atlanta History Center's media relations manager in 2015. An increasingly rare Atlanta native, he is a folk art enthusiast and serves on the board of the Paradise Garden Foundation, which works to restore and operate Paradise Garden, the folk art environment of the late Rev. Howard Finster located in the northwest Georgia town of Summerville. © 2017 Howard Pousner. All rights reserved.



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