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South City Museum to preserve neighborhood's rich history

By [Julia Baker](#), Daily Memphian

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The former MLK Transition Academy/Porter School at 620 S. Lauderdale will be transformed into a museum space honoring South Memphis history. (Mark Weber/The Daily Memphian)



Three or four years ago, when Archie Willis III, head of ComCap Partners and its nonprofit entity Urban Renaissance Partners, progressed on the housing community in South Memphis, he realized the neighborhood needed more than apartments.

More cultural enrichment and historical representation was needed in the community.

[Robert Church, the Hooks family and Aretha: New museum to showcase South Memphis](#)

It also dawned on him that his adult children knew nothing about the neighborhood's past, and that all history would be lost if not somehow archived.

Thus, he decided to convert a gymnasium of the former Porter School at 620 S. Lauderdale into a museum space honoring South Memphis history both before and after the Civil War. By the summer of 2024, the South City Museum and Cultural Center will celebrate historical figures and landmarks of what's considered the Historic South Memphis area.

"My parents and their generation were major players in the civil rights movement in the '50s and '60s," the 64-year-old said. "So I happen to have grown up with a lot of these people. And also recognizing that that generation is slowly transitioning, there's a lot of history that's going to get lost, just because people are passing on and nobody has recorded that history."

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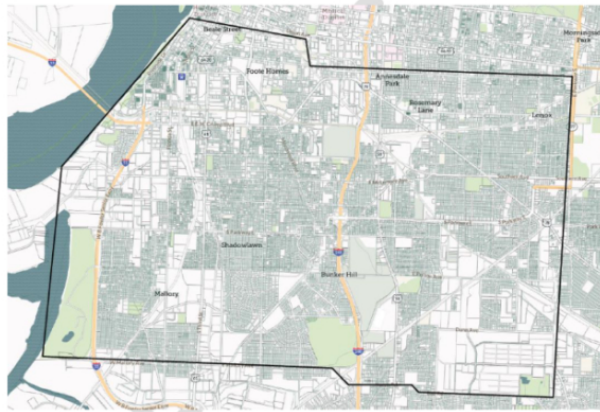
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SOUTH CITY museum & cultural center

INITIAL FOCUS AREA

Boundaries:

- North – Beale Street (to Walnut) /Vance
- East – East Parkway South (to S. Parkway) /Airways
- West – Mississippi River
- South – Mallory Ave/Norris Road/ Ball Road



The Memphis 200

Memphis history runs through Willis' blood. His father was A.W. Willis, a Memphis attorney, businessman, civil rights leader, and community builder who became the first African American elected to the Tennessee General Assembly since the Reconstruction period post-Civil War. Auction Street in Uptown/Pinch district was renamed A.W. Willis Avenue in his honor in 1987.

Willis III's grandfather, Archie Willis Sr., co-founded Universal Life Insurance, a successful Black-owned insurance company in Memphis. The building, located at 480 Dr. M.L. King Jr. Ave., was placed on the National Register in 2007. It is currently occupied by Self+Tucker Architects, whose projects have included Stax Museum, Stax Music Academy, FedExForum and the National Civil Rights Museum.

The Memphis 200: Part 2

In 2016, the City of Memphis was given a [Choice Neighborhoods grant](#) by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development and hired Willis' team at ComCap Partners to organize a community-centered approach to the \$210 million mixed-use redevelopment of the school, which is currently under a purchase agreement.

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The 96,000-square-foot school will serve as a community hub geared towards education with an early childhood education center in the cafeteria and Girls Inc. in the girls gym.

The museum and cultural center will be located in the 11,800-square-foot boys gym of the building, which was the school's basketball gym including Martin Luther King Jr. gymnasium.



building, which was the school for historical figures including Maxine Smith, an academic, civil rights activist and school board official; Russell Sugarmon, former judge, state senator and civil rights leader; Booker T. Jones, Grammy Award-winning frontman of the band Booker T. & the M.G.'s.; and A.W. Willis, Jr, Willis III's father.

The Memphis 200 Chapter 3: Alice Mitchell, Overton Square, Piomingo and the Memphis Chicks

Other notable people to come from the South Memphis area include Robert Reed Church, Maurice White and Willie Herenton. The area was also home to well-known families like the family of Julia Hooks (known as "Angel of Beale Street"), the Rufus Thomas family, and the Jesse H. Turner family.

"It's a fairly impressive list of Memphians in all walks of life that came out of the greater South Memphis area," Willis said.

Memphis 200 Part 4: People, institutions, events shaped city

Willis defines the historic South Memphis borders to include Beale Street and Vance to the north; East Parkway and Airways Boulevard to the east; Mallory Ave/Norris Road/Ball Road on the South; and Mississippi River to the west.

Iconic landmarks include Universal Life Insurance, Clayborn Temple, National Civil Rights Museum and R.S. Lewis and Sons Funeral Home. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Lewis family owned the Memphis Red Sox, a Negro American League team that played at a baseball stadium called Lewis Park. That stadium no longer exists.

"I don't remember the stadium myself," Willis said. "I have an older sister who does remember the stadium. But again, the generation behind me and behind them, they have no idea that there was actually a baseball stadium and a (African American) baseball team playing baseball in the heart of South Memphis."

The Memphis 200: The final 20 entries

With preserving the history of the greater South Memphis area in mind, Willis tried organizing the pieces of the museum in 2019 until the pandemic hit and halted his progress. He realized he would need a professional curator and partnered with Memphis' Museum of Science and History (MoSH), which will handle the curating, staffing, management, community engagement and guest services.

"It fits so squarely with where we're headed with MoSH," said Kevin Thompson, MoSH's executive director. "We're taking the museum in a completely new direction, which is part of telling the complete story of Memphis history and doing that through a well-rounded lens and taking in multiple viewpoints, multiple perspectives."

Right now, MoSH, the umbrella organization for the Pink Palace and Lichterman Nature Center, is determining the storyline for the museum. But they aim to create an "active" exhibit they can change and add to at any time. This summer, the museum group will dedicate research duties to two interns from Rhodes College.

MoSH is also starting to think about the kind of programming they will bring in to complement the museum's exhibits. This may require partnering with other organizations to bring in cultural and community components.

"We're not just talking about designing and exhibits, murals and artifacts on display," Thompson said. "We're also talking about how we connect to the community right there, that neighborhood, the high school across the street. What are some of the programming things we can do?"

Historic Mallory-Neely House to reopen for tours

MoSH is working with Earnestine Jenkins, professor of art history at the University of Memphis who grew up in South Memphis, to gather information about the history of the community.

"It means a lot, because my experience is the experience of people there and who are working on this project," Jenkins said. "They have the same sort of experience. And I don't think the city of Memphis has done a really good job of documenting its own history. And unfortunately, we still don't have a museum here that is dedicated just to doing that."

Jenkins has a long line of history in the area. Her maternal great-grandfather was a runaway slave, and her maternal great-grandfather was one of the first Black faculty members at

LeMoyné Normal Institute (now Memphis' only HBCU, LeMoyné-Owen College). Jenkins herself was part of South Memphis history during the civil rights era when she was one of three students admitted to the newly integrated Whitehaven High School in 1968.

She said gathering information, artifacts and relics is going to be a very "locally oriented" effort, which will involve identifying living individuals who may have photos, diplomas, and other mementos pertaining to their ancestors. The effort will also involve identifying other key landmarks that still stand.

"I think it'd probably generate the same interest in a lot of other communities in the city who want to do the same in terms of telling the histories of their people as well," Jenkins said.

“I don’t think the city of Memphis has done a really good job of documenting its own history. And unfortunately, we still don’t have a museum here that is dedicated just to doing that.”

Earnestine Jenkins
University of Memphis professor

Willis hopes to develop partnerships with other organizations that are local to the area, such as LeMoyné-Owen College. And he welcomes assistance from other individuals.

"We hope to get other people involved with the project that can bring something to the table," Willis said. "It's going to be a community-wide effort to really pull in the information and do the research."

Willis serves as the chair of the board. Other board members include Marlon Foster of Knowledge Quest and Estella Mayhue-Greer, former executive director of Mid-South Food Bank. All three board members are from South Memphis. In the next month or so, Willis plans on expanding the board.

The board is in the beginning stages of getting the development off the ground but estimates the cost to be around \$3 million. This does not include the cost of organizing the exhibit. The board is in the process of organizing capital campaigns and fundraisers.

After the museum opens, the hope is that visitor participation, ticketing and memberships will provide a sustainable revenue.

But most importantly, Willis hopes to provide a broader impact to the South Memphis community.

"We hope that the impact on the human side is dramatic in terms of the neighborhood, and instilling a degree of pride and hope," Willis said. "And that that hope also just spills over to the broader Memphis community in terms of making people more aware of the contributions that the African American residents made to this city throughout its history over the last 100 years."

TOPICS

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Julia Baker

Julia Baker covers criminal justice for The Daily Memphian. A lifelong Memphian, Julia graduated from the University of Memphis in 2021. Other publications and organizations she has written for include Chalkbeat, Memphis Flyer, Memphis Parent magazine and Memphis magazine.



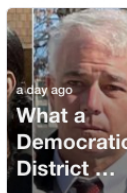
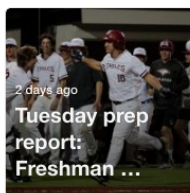
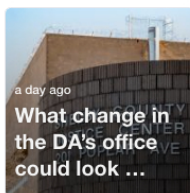
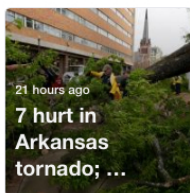
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