

# THE HISTORIC SQUARES OF BRUNSWICK

## TILLING A PATH FOR REVITALIZATION

Photos courtesy of Jerry Spencer



BY J.M. LACEY

Three years ago, Carol Snyder and her children, Emma and Will, decided to investigate the pile of stones lying in the backyard of their home on Cedar Creek.

Though the stones were stacked haphazardly along the creek bank and covered with leaves and twigs, the Snyders knew these were no ordinary rocks. Ornately carved with scrolls, leaf work, lion heads and ram horns, these stones had a story to tell.

After visiting the local library, the Snyders found that their stones were in fact granite carvings taken from the façade of the old First National Bank of Brunswick. The bank, which inhabited a lot on Newcastle Street now occupied by the S.H. Kress and Company Building, was demolished in 1958. The contractor in charge of the project owned the house the Snyders now own, and disposed of the stones along the creek bank behind the house to prevent erosion of the yard.

Knowing the history of the stones led the Snyder family, including husband and father Alex, to ponder a new fate for their lot.

"My husband and I felt that they should be seen by everyone and that they should not be used as rubble on a creek bank," Carol says. "They should be restored as much as possible to their original grandeur and beauty."

The family invited Brunswick Mayor Bryan Thompson and Julie Hunter, executive director of Signature Squares, to view the stones. The two decided that Signature Squares, a nonprofit formed in 2004 to restore and preserve Brunswick's 14 historic city parks, should inherit the stones for use in the restoration of Machen Square. Machen is a serene pocket of green space off Newcastle Street that borders the Kress Building.

Kim Irby, a graduate student pursuing a Master of Fine Arts degree in Architectural History at the Savannah College of Art and Design, has been commissioned to work

with the façade pieces and recreate the history that once stood on Newcastle.

"I would like to see the stones used in a way that will re-establish a cultural connection with a once thriving and architecturally significant downtown," she says.

With the restoration of two squares under its belt already, Signature Squares is spurring a revival of the downtown business district that has merchants buzzing.

Marilyn Hauser, owner of Inspirations Home Décor and More at 1413 Newcastle Street, opened her shop in August of 2007, next to Jekyll Square.

"What I liked most about the location of the business was the fact that there were these parks next door to me as well as across the street," she explains. "When I found out (the squares) were being renovated, I knew it would be a draw for the customers."

Barbara E. Ingram, owner of Paramount Printing at 300 Gloucester Street, moved into her establishment in 2002. Since then, she has seen a lot of building renovation downtown and the revitalization of the squares adds to the impact.

"I was really thrilled to see Julie and (Signature Squares) begin their work on the squares," she says. "Everybody is doing their part to create an image downtown and that, I think, is going to affect tourism and the businesses."

Even though the city has cut its annual donation to the organization by two-thirds this year, Julie says she is writing more

grants and the organization is still popular with corporate and private donors. The largest donation to date comes from the DeLong-Sweet Family Foundation based in California. The organization was founded by retired Navy Capt. Walter E. "Bud" DeLong, who served as executive officer of the Naval Air Station based at McKinnon-St. Simons Island Airport at the end of World War II. The foundation awards grants in support of human self-sufficiency, domestic animal welfare, and the arts and historical preservation.

Jim DeLong, a St. Simons Island resident who serves as managing trustee of the fund, says the grant was given in recognition of Capt. DeLong's service at NAS St. Simons and the "obvious large and positive impact" Signature Squares is having on the continued improvement of downtown Brunswick.

The foundation donated \$10,000 toward Jekyll Square, and an additional \$165,000 to be paid over the next three years for Machen. Jim says the organization has effectively adopted Machen, and hopes others will follow suit.

Both the east and west ends of Machen will undergo an estimated \$250,000 renovation. Much of the landscaping, including the trees, shrubs and flowers, will be removed, rearranged and replaced with plantings that will not only be pleasing to the eye, but safe for residents. The high, thick shrubs in place currently allow areas for people to hide and throw litter. The new layout includes lower bushes pushed further back and closer to the buildings to open the square more. Some of the trees – including the southern magnolia, cabbage palm and Canary Island Date Palm – will remain. The walkways will be reformatted and a fountain installed. Signature Squares will add lighting in a design similar to that used in Brunswick in the early 20th century.



Peggy Shanahan Parrish, part-owner of Ned Cash and Associates at 1418 Newcastle Street, says that now is an exciting time to be downtown.

"There are so many new businesses. People are cleaning up the area, and the work Signature Squares has done with the parks has been just fabulous," she says. Although there are many others working hard to improve the area, Peggy says Signature Squares in particular has done wonderful things to beautify the downtown.

Julie, who also works as a Realtor, says that interest in historic district real estate has picked up.

"There is a value placed on (the squares)," she says, adding that the renovations have a direct relationship with property values.

The Trust for Public Land says in a recent report – "Measuring the Economic Value of a City Park System" – that "more than 30 studies have shown that parks have a positive impact on nearby residential property values.

"Beautiful natural resource parks with great trees, trails, meadows and gardens are markedly valuable. Less attractive or poorly maintained parks are only marginally valuable," the Trust writes in the report, while parks with "frightening or dangerous aspects" can reduce nearby property values.

Kissy Tuten, part-owner of Cunningham Jewelers at 1510 Newcastle Street, says the revitalization of the squares has given the downtown area a face lift.

"I think they've improved the look of these squares tremendously," she says. "They're beautiful parks."

Julie's vision is to see the squares not only enhancing the economic viability of downtown, but also increasing Brunswick's ability to attract tourists.

Signature Squares has installed signs in each square to identify them by name, and is working on interpretive signs to include photographs and first-person stories with interesting details about each square.

But the granite façade pieces salvaged from obscurity along a creek bank will be the focal point for Machen Square.

"That's going to speak directly to the architectural history of the city," says Julie. ■

*To find out more about Signature Squares of Brunswick and to donate, visit [SignatureSquares.org](http://SignatureSquares.org), write to: P.O. Box 846, Brunswick, GA 31521, or call 912.258.1588.*



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