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# OLD DECATUR

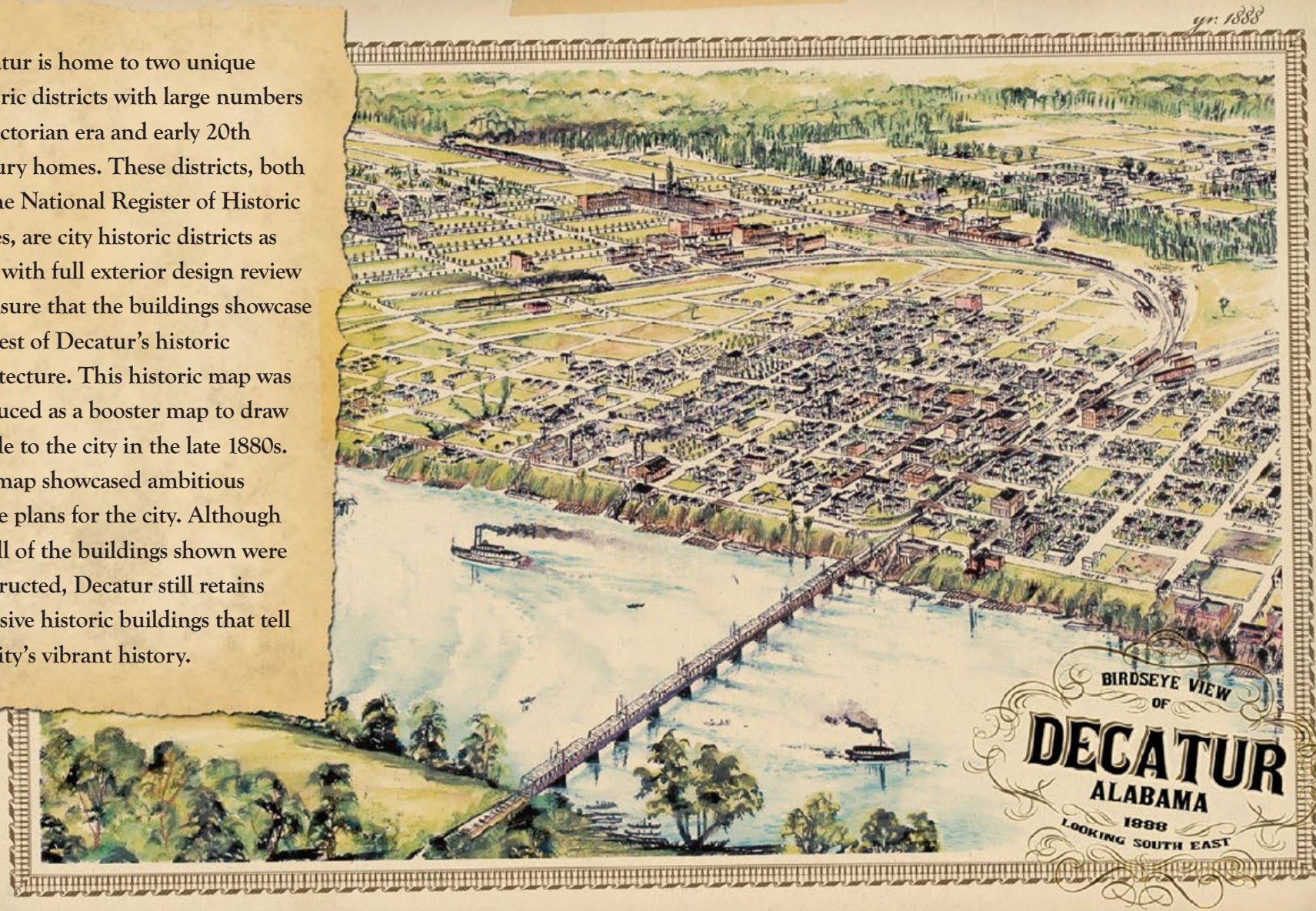
HISTORIC



DISTRICT

FLOURISHING WITH RICH HISTORY & ARCHITECTURE,  
DECATUR, ALABAMA, IS HOME TO TWO UNIQUE HISTORIC DISTRICTS  
THAT DATE FROM THE 1880'S TO EARLY 20TH CENTURY.

Decatur is home to two unique historic districts with large numbers of Victorian era and early 20th century homes. These districts, both on the National Register of Historic Places, are city historic districts as well, with full exterior design review to ensure that the buildings showcase the best of Decatur's historic architecture. This historic map was produced as a booster map to draw people to the city in the late 1880s. The map showcased ambitious future plans for the city. Although not all of the buildings shown were constructed, Decatur still retains extensive historic buildings that tell our city's vibrant history.



*There are two tour options: Old Decatur and Albany. Each tour takes about an hour.*

# OLD DECATUR

HISTORIC  DISTRICT

The Old Decatur Historic District dates back to the town's settlement in the early 1800s. At that time it was called Rhodes Ferry Landing, after Dr. Henry W. Rhodes, an early landowner who operated the only ferry across the Tennessee River at Decatur. The city was renamed Decatur in 1821 in honor of Commodore Stephen Decatur. Official incorporation took place in 1826.

With a bank, railroad, and river as drivers, Decatur began growing between 1830 and 1860. The Civil War, however, drastically changed the landscape of this community. Those strategic assets made the city prime real estate for Union and Confederate armies during the war. The city changed hands multiple times.

In 1862 the Union troops took Decatur, evacuated the city, and burned the railroad bridge. In 1864 Decatur was almost completely razed, with the



*Scene in Decatur Ala. May 1864*

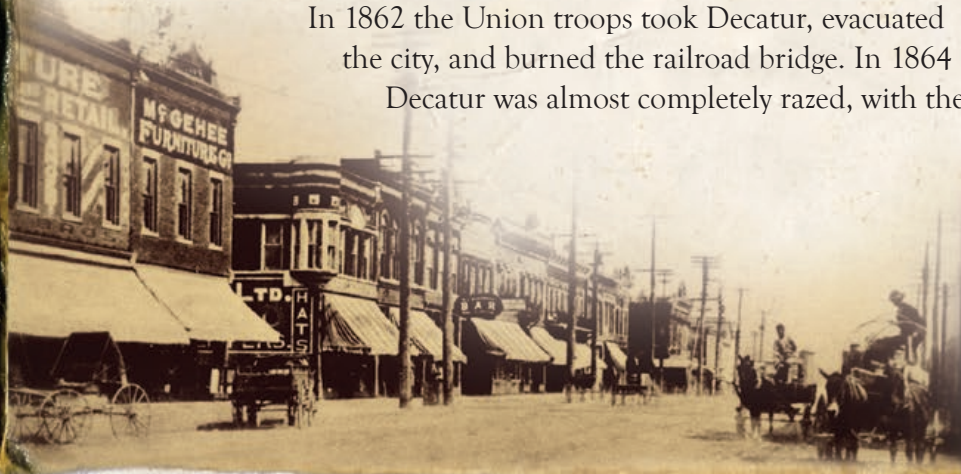


*Up Tenn. River  
 (1) First Pier in R.R. Bridge  
 (2) Gun Boat, built at Bridge post "Anti-Sherman"*



union army using wood and brick from the buildings to build fortifications. Only four buildings were left standing.

It took years for Decatur to recover from the Civil War. One of the important developments in the community's resurgence was the expansion of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad Company in 1871, which connected Montgomery to Nashville by way of Decatur. In 1886, 640 railroad cars passed through L&N's Decatur tracks every day. Just as the economy began to rebound, yellow fever hit the area in 1878. The disease killed 51 people, but hundreds more - including the mayor - left town to avoid infection. Many never returned.





CITY OF  
**DECATUR**

*Buildings are privately  
owned and not open  
to the public unless  
otherwise noted.*

**OLD DECATUR**  
HISTORIC  DISTRICT

*Scan on Decatur  
Map  
Up Town  
at Bridge*



## STOP 1. The Old State Bank – 925 Bank Street

The Old State Bank was built in 1833 at a cost of \$9,842. It opened that year as a branch of the Alabama State Bank and was profitable until 1837. After the bank accumulated outstanding debts of over a million dollars, its franchise was revoked. The banking system's

dissolution in 1842 was blamed on “political shenanigans” and poor lending practices. An economic depression that struck in 1837 also played a part. Old State Bank is the oldest standing bank building in Alabama, and because the Union Army used the bank as a hospital, it is one of only four buildings in Decatur that survived the destruction of the town.

The building supported a variety of uses after it was no longer utilized by the bank. It served as a house, a restaurant, and even as a fraternal hall for the American Legion. In 1934 the building was restored by the Civil Works Administration, a federal program

## STOP 2. Historic Bank Street

Most of the buildings are from the late 19th to early 20th century, the result of various fires that destroyed earlier buildings downtown. As you walk down the block, notice the remnants of bricks and rails down the center where trolleys once connected the downtowns of Old Decatur and Albany.



that created jobs during the Great Depression. Carolyn Cortner Smith, Alabama's first woman to practice architecture, oversaw the work. In 1946 Leila Cantwell Seton Edmundson donated the building to the City of Decatur.

Known for her excellent farm management skills, Ms. Edmundson served on the executive committee for the National Farmers Union and was known as Alabama's “Cotton Queen.” In 1922 she became the first female to run for Congress in Alabama. The Bank was renamed Leila Cantwell Seton Hall in her honor.

In 1972 the Old State Bank was listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Currently owned by the city, the bank is open for free tours. In the garden area behind the bank is a small detached building with public restrooms.





### STOP 3. **Simp McGhee's – 725 Bank Street**

On the west corner of Bank and Lafayette Streets, you'll see Simp McGhee's – a restaurant named after quite a character from Decatur's history. Simp was a riverboat captain in the 1880s who was renowned for having a beer-swilling pet pig for a drinking companion. His diversified Decatur holdings included a saloon here on Bank Street and a house of ill repute. There are many stories about Simp, but the most famous is his relationship with Kate Lackner, known as "Miss Kate." She was married and the mother of a young son when Simp met and fell in love with her. Simp and Kate never married, but she eventually purchased his house of ill repute, which was known as a "gentleman's sporting house." It was said that Miss Kate had the loveliest ladies in all of the Tennessee Valley. She paraded her girls up and down Bank Street on Sunday afternoons, first in horse-drawn carriages, then in "open automobiles" or convertibles.



### STOP 4. **Old Hargrove & Murdock Grocery – 502 Bank Street**

On the corner of Bank and Cherry Streets is a charming building built in 1897 on land owned by the Decatur Mineral and Land Company. For "old timers" it is best remembered as the location of Hargrove & Murdock Grocery circa 1925 until 1942. Before that it housed a tin shop and marble cutting enterprise. The main level features original arched windows on the west side and oval windows, believed to be original – on the south side. On the inside walls where the exterior brick is exposed, visitors might see fibers in the plaster. They are horsehair, used in the late 19th century as a support and bonding material in plaster applications.



### STOP 5. **The Hamil House 422 Oak Street**

Dr. James Y. and Minnie Hamil built this striking brick and stone accented house in 1929. With its steep cross gabled roof and elegant tapered chimney, it is typical of the Tudor Revival houses built in the 1920s in the Old Decatur neighborhood.



## STOP 6. John T. Banks Building – 402 Oak Street

Civil War veteran, druggist and early city leader John T. Banks constructed this brick building in 1887. It became the center of a political storm in Morgan County in 1891 when a vote declared Decatur as the county seat. Residents then moved records surreptitiously at night from Somerville.

Originally three stories, the Banks Building housed the courthouse for two years while a permanent courthouse on Ferry Street was being built. Later, the building housed a hospital and retail store. After a fire in 1915, the third story was removed and the building was mainly used for apartments and boarding rooms until the 1970s.



## STOP 7. Shadowlawn – 504 Line Street

This stately Greek Revival house was historically surrounded by towering oaks that inspired its name. It was built circa 1874 for Dr. William Gardner and Elizabeth J. Evans Gill. One of the oldest practicing physicians in the state at that time, Dr. Gill came out of retirement to attend patients during Decatur's last major Yellow Fever epidemic in 1888. He was one of five doctors who perished from the disease in autumn of that year.



## STOP 8. The Leadingham House – 501 Line Street

The small Folk Victorian cottage with its charming porch was home to maiden sisters Rebecca and Louise Leadingham. Rebecca had served as a supervisor of public schools in Memphis, Tennessee, before returning home to be with her mother and sister. By the late 1800s through

the 1920s she operated a private school from the house, which taught Latin, French, and visual and performing arts. Louise served as a librarian at the Carnegie Library and was a board member of the city's Library War Council, which organized during World War I to supply books and periodicals to military personnel.



## STOP 9. The Collier Home 511 Line Street

The Collier home was built for the town clerk, Edward W. Collier, who married Annie E. Taylor, a niece of the Leadingham sisters in 1885. The two-story house shows Queen Anne influences and is an excellent example of an unusual

architectural detail, rustication. Rustication is a technique where the exterior of a wood building is treated to make it appear as if it were made from stone blocks. Only the front elevation of the building has been given this finish. The side elevations reveal simple wood siding. Rustication is a very old technique, one of the earliest examples in the United States is at Mt. Vernon, George Washington's estate.



## STOP 10. Japanese Garden at Frazier Park

To the south side of Shadowlawn is a wonderful place to take a break, Frazier Park, named for a Decatur business leader who was instrumental in restoring Old Decatur. On the west end of the park

is a traditional Japanese garden made possible by a generous donation to the City of Decatur by one of our local industries, Daikin America, Inc. The water feature in the center of the park is particularly calming.



OLD DECATUR  
HISTORIC DISTRICT



### STOP 11. Judge Seybourn Lynne Home 503 Ferry Street

This American Foursquare house has a large wraparound porch that provides shade from the afternoon sun. Constructed in 1925, it served as the home to one of Decatur's prominent leaders, Judge Seybourn Lynne and his wife Annie Leigh Harris Lynne. Judge Lynne was appointed to a federal judgeship in 1945 by Harry Truman and served for 55 years on the bench until he passed at the age of 93 in 2000. Judge Lynne played an important role in several Civil Rights rulings. He served as part of a three-judge panel that issued a ruling that helped desegregate buses and brought an end to the Montgomery bus boycott. In 1963 Judge

Lynne issued an order to then-Governor George Wallace stating that he could not deny African Americans the right to enroll at the University of Alabama. It was enforced when President John F. Kennedy called upon the state's National Guard to assist the students in enrolling.

### STOP 13. The J.T. Jones House 601 Ferry Street

The J.T. Jones House, or as it's often called, "The Gingerbread House," was built in 1899 by a cotton broker. The home is an excellent example of the Queen Anne style of Victorian architecture. The house is a pattern book plan, drafted by Knoxville, Tennessee, architect George Franklin Barber. Other examples of this extravagant plan are found in Tennessee, Indiana, and Maryland.

Ms. Blanche Jones was a highly respected member of the community. Her niece - then 83 - told this favorite story about a young Blanche. There was a wealthy family that lived on Line Street who had an only



### STOP 12. The Williamson House 517 Ferry Street

This large Free Classic Victorian home was built in 1903 for George and Edna Malena Scruggs Williamson. George operated Williamson's dry good store on Bank Street. Although this style of Victorian era architecture is known for simpler exterior decoration and classical details, the home still has some extravagant features, including the spectacular leaded glass front door.



child, a grown son who was spoiled rotten.

He never worked, just partied and played. He craved Miss Blanche's approval so to impress her he would mow her lawn without

being asked or leave candy and flowers on her porch. One day he came up to her and asked if he became sober, would he go to Heaven. She looked him in the eye and said, "No, you'll just go to Hell sober!"







### STOP 14. Cartwright House 601 Line Street

This house was the residence of Matthew T. and Anna Lou Cartwright. Matthew arrived in Decatur from Limestone County in the early 1870s and started

a dry goods store. Bank Street suffered multiple fires during the city's early history, and Matthew's store burned down not once, but twice in the late 1800s. The first fire, in 1887, was started by a kitchen flue, and spread more than a block. The second fire, remembered as a disastrous "conflagration" was started after a hardware store on Bank Street had a powder explosion, destroying six businesses and shaking buildings a mile away.

### STOP 15. Fort Nash 522 Oak Street

This house is known by its nickname, "Fort Nash," because of its rare Art Moderne style. Designed in 1939 by the head of Auburn's architecture department, it was given as a wedding gift from local Coca-Cola magnate Ms. Ruby Nash to her daughter. The home features limestone walls with glass block windows. The circular entry leads to a semi-circular room. The house sports a full basement which originally had a shuffleboard court and glass brick bar with a full soda fountain.



### STOP 16. The Moseley House 618 Line Street

Decatur's only example of the Second Empire Revival style, the Moseley House features a mansard roof, elaborate double walnut doors, and floor-length windows. The detailing around the porch and upper roofline are particularly ornate. The house was built circa 1887 for William and Sue Halsey Moseley.

William was one of the largest property owners in town and served as the postmaster in Decatur.



### STOP 17. The Pattern Book Homes 306 & 312 LaFayette Street

In the middle of the block are two single-story houses. If you look closely you can see they are identical. These are pattern book houses. Pattern books were books of architectural designs that would often provide enough information for non-architects to build houses that are copies of architect-designed buildings. Pattern books made architectural designs available to the middle class that previously had been restricted to the wealthy. The books generally didn't provide precise measurements, but provided enough for cost estimation. Skilled carpenters could adapt the plans by changing dimensions or altering components.

**STOP 18. Gibson House**  
**305 LaFayette Street**

This elaborate Queen Anne house, like the one at 601 Ferry, is a pattern book design from architect George Franklin Barber. The design was first introduced to the public in the August 1899 issue of American Homes. The plan, known as the "Every State of the Union" plan, was supposedly built in every state of the Union, and in Canada and Cuba as well, according to Barber publications.

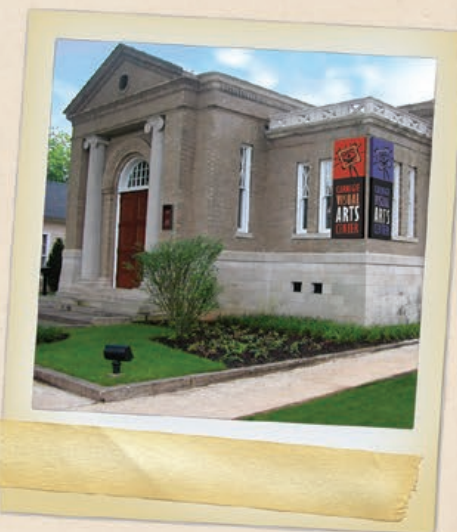
George and Hannah Holland lived here in the early 20th century. George managed the Holland-Blow Stave Company, which owned four mills in Alabama and southern Kentucky. Decatur was the site of their finishing plant constructed in 1903.



**STOP 19. The Carnegie Visual Arts Center**  
**207 Church Street**

Completed in September of 1904, Decatur's Carnegie Library was one of more than 2,500 libraries built by the steel tycoon and millionaire philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. At the turn of the 19th century Carnegie began to fund libraries throughout the United States. Decatur's Carnegie Library, which originally cost \$8,500, served as the city's library from 1904 until 1973. When the main library outgrew the facility, the building was used for the children's library.

Starting in 1999 the Decatur Arts Council began to share a vision of a renovated Carnegie Library that could serve as a visual and cultural arts center and education facility. Restoration of the building was completed in 2003. The center features local and traveling exhibits, and is open to the public at no charge.





### **STOP 20. Thomas Terrace – 113 Church Street**

Constructed in the 1930s, Thomas Terrace was built to help address an apartment shortage in Decatur by the Thomas family, of Thomas Furniture. Construction was overseen by Ms. Jane Thomas. The building is an excellent example of the Tudor Revival style. The arched entries, rusticated stone accents and half timbering showcase some of the most ornate elements of the style. The building's highly visible location across the street from First Baptist Church and catty-corner from the Carnegie Visual Arts Center makes it a neighborhood icon.



### **STOP 21. First United Methodist Church – 805 Canal Street**

The historic portion of First United Methodist Church's sanctuary was dedicated on Easter Sunday in 1899. The Methodist Episcopal Church – South, as it was then known, raised a sanctuary as early as 1835, and was the earliest congregation in Decatur. The congregation has worshiped in several different buildings throughout the years. Their first building, a one-room brick church, was destroyed by Union soldiers during the Civil War. The federal government later reimbursed the congregation for the damage. Their second building was constructed under the leadership of the Reverend John Harmon Nichols. A disabled veteran of the Confederate 16th Tennessee Volunteers, he arrived in 1886, determined to build a church in Decatur.

## STOP 22. The Dancy-Polk House – 901 Railroad Street NW

Just outside the Old Decatur Historic District is one of the houses that survived the razing of Decatur during the Civil War – the Dancy-Polk House, constructed in 1829. The home can be viewed from the western end of the parking lot for the Old State bank, near the white metal fence. There is a pedestrian walking bridge across the railroad tracks that allows closer viewing.

The Dancy-Polk House was designed by architect Christopher Cheatham for town pioneer Col. Frank Dancy. It later became the Polk Hotel, a popular spot for railroad travelers debarking from the Union depot. The simple, symmetrical Federal style home incorporated yellow pine with chestnut columns. During the Civil War, Union forces commandeered the site for their headquarters. It has been said that in 1881 outlaws Dick Little and Frank James, brother of Jesse James, allegedly spent several days at the hotel under assumed names.



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## STOP 23. Southern Railway Depot – 701 Railroad Street NW

Constructed in 1905 for the Southern Railway for use as their passenger depot, the building is a symbol of Decatur's rich railroad heritage which extends back to the 1830s when the first railroad west of the Allegheny Mountains, the Tuscumbia, Courtland, and Decatur Railroad, was built. This building was jointly used by two railroads, the Southern and the Louisville & Nashville railroads. The depot is owned by the city and open for free tours.

## STOP 24. Rhodes Ferry Park – 100 Market Street NW

You may wish to visit Rhodes Ferry Park, a beautiful public park on the Tennessee River. The site is located on the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail. Decatur was one of the stops on the 1,000 mile journey west for the Cherokee Trail of Tears; 2,300 Cherokee arrived on steamboats and flatboats on the river's banks and then boarded train cars. The park is named for Dr. Henry W. Rhodes, an early landowner who operated a ferry that crossed the Tennessee River in the early 1800s.

*Oak Street – at the Carnegie Center for the Arts – crosses Highway 20 to take you directly to the park.*



This project was made possible by the City of Decatur and Decatur-Morgan County Tourism. Copyright 2024. Designed and produced by McComm Group, Inc. Special thanks to Caroline Swope, Historic Preservation Specialist for the City of Decatur, and John Allison, Morgan County Archivist.

For more information about  
Decatur, stop by our Visitors  
Center at 350 Market Street.