

# A Georgia Restaurant Has a Racist History. What Should Become of It?



By Tariro Mzezewa

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At Aunt Fanny's Cabin, which closed years ago, young Black waiters sang for white patrons. The community is divided over how, and whether, to preserve the institution's legacy.



Aunt Fanny's Cabin, a restaurant in Smyrna, Ga., shut down years ago.

Credit...Lane Brothers, via Georgia State University

SMYRNA, Ga. — For half a century, celebrities, tourists and local residents flocked to Aunt Fanny's Cabin, a restaurant known as much for its Southern menu as for its depiction of plantation life and racist imagery, where white patrons were served by young Black waiters with yoke-like wooden menu boards hung around their necks.

Aunt Fanny herself — Fanny Williams, a Black cook who worked for the white family who owned the business — was once described in a newspaper article as “a famous colored mammy.”

The restaurant shut down 30 years ago, but the little white cabin itself, easily overlooked along Atlanta Road in the small suburban city of Smyrna, has become the center of an unlikely debate about how a Southern community can move on from its painful past without forgetting its history in the process.

City officials recently proposed [tearing the building down](#), arguing that it had fallen into such disrepair that fixing it would be too costly. [The place had been a source of civic discomfort for years](#), but among those pushing hardest to save it were members of Smyrna’s Black community, who argued that demolishing the cabin would erase a critical part of local Black history. Last week, a decision to preserve Aunt Fanny’s Cabin but move it to a nearby farm gave supporters a chance to wrestle with how best to preserve the complicated story of the restaurant — and of Ms. Williams herself.



Maryline Blackburn outside the defunct restaurant in Smyrna, Ga. She led the Coalition to Save Aunt Fanny’s Cabin, an interracial group that worked to preserve the building.

Credit...Alyssa Pointer for The New York Times

“The city is embarrassed and instead of figuring out how to honor Fanny Williams, they want to erase her,” said Maryline Blackburn, a leader of the Coalition to Save Aunt Fanny’s Cabin, a group of Black and white residents that worked to preserve the building. “Those images of the boys with the menus are atrocious. However, that is a part of history. You can’t change it. You can’t take it away, sweep it under a rug to make yourself feel better about it.”

The argument over Aunt Fanny’s comes at a time when scores of Confederate statues and other symbols of the Old South have been removed or relocated. But the fate of the Smyrna restaurant has been divisive and personal in a different way, as Black residents recall their own experiences working at Aunt Fanny’s and seek to learn more about the woman at the center of the debate.

Aunt Fanny’s Cabin, which was segregated in its early years, operated from 1941 to 1992, serving fried chicken, macaroni and cheese, “gen-u-wine Smithfield ham” and other regional specialties. Black people worked as cooks, hosts, servers and busboys. Waiters were made to sing for white patrons. The uniforms for female employees included pinafore dresses and head

wraps that evoked the era of slavery. It was, for a time, among the best-known restaurants in the Atlanta area and inspired other local restaurants that romanticized the region's plantation history.

[Jackie Gleason ate at Aunt Fanny's](#). So did Clark Gable.

Some former employees recall the institution with nothing but disgust.



Roderick McNeal worked at Aunt Fanny's in the summer of 1959.

Credit...Alyssa Pointer for The New York Times

“It don't remind me of nothing but racism,” said Roderick McNeal, who worked at Aunt Fanny's in the summer of 1959. “It's an old racist's house, and it's past time for it to go.”

Lisa Castleberry, who worked there in the 1970s, said that simply passing by the now-vacant building regularly reminds her of a painful time in Smyrna's history.

“Now that I'm older, I'm like, ‘Oh man, that was so degrading,’ but it was a job,” said Ms. Castleberry, who is 61.

Ms. Castleberry, who is Black, said that although segregation was officially over by the time she worked there, she and her family, friends and neighbors never felt comfortable going to Aunt Fanny's.

Other former employees had fonder memories.

“Even if it was based on slave times, no one treated us like slaves, and it is a part of history,” said Jo Ann Trimble, who worked at Aunt Fanny's for 19 years. “I'll be 75 this year and I've done every kind of job, and that is the only job I've ever loved.”

Ms. Trimble supported her children with her salary and tips from Aunt Fanny's. Her sisters, children, aunts and cousins all worked there too at different points. The fact that the restaurant helped many Black Smyrna residents build their lives is reason enough to save the building, she said, even if it makes people uncomfortable.



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Smyrna, a city of about 56,000 people, is about 46 percent white and 33 percent Black. In 2017, Ms. Blackburn became the first and only Black woman to sit on the City Council. She and others working to save Aunt Fanny's said that the project presented the community with an opportunity to confront the racism that existed within it while also honoring a Black woman who helped build her community.

More than 70 years after her death in 1949, very little is actually known about Fanny Williams beyond her role as the restaurant's namesake and cook. Local researchers believe she made financial contributions to African Americans in the region, donating to Wheat Street Baptist Church, an African-American church in Atlanta, and raising money for Marietta's first Black hospital.

Activists are working to locate Ms. Williams's grave in the city's South View Cemetery. They have plans to tell her story at schools and are holding a design competition to reimagine the cabin.

Turning the building into a welcome center, a museum or culinary school for Southern food, supporters said, would be a way to honor her.

"We have no standing structure that honors our history in Smyrna," said Shaun Martin, an architect who is Black and has been studying the cabin for years. "Aunt Fanny's Cabin could be a place where all of Black Smyrnites could be celebrated in a space that is reclaimed to give us the dignity that they stole from us for decades."

Members of the City Council and other residents who wanted the building gone said that the city could memorialize Ms. Williams in other ways.



Aunt Fanny’s Cabin, which was known for its Southern menu but also its celebration of plantation life and racist imagery, has been closed for 30 years.

Credit...Alyssa Pointer for The New York Times

“Why don’t we honor her by putting a picture of her in a museum? We can teach kids about her or build a statue,” said Bernice Livsey, a resident who is Black. “Anything’s better than keeping this little house and saying it’s to honor her.”

The restaurant was originally created as a store by Isoline Campbell McKenna, the daughter of a wealthy white family for whom Ms. Williams worked. It changed hands over the years — outliving Ms. Williams by four decades — and hasn’t been operated as a restaurant since 1992. The building has been in the city’s possession since 1997, when the government saved it from being torn down by developers. In recent months, it has been cordoned off with yellow caution tape, deemed unsafe by the city.

In December, city officials said the building would be destroyed if no one came forward with a proposal and the money to move it. Last week, the City Council accepted an offer from the owners of a nearby cattle farm to move the cabin there and to honor Ms. Williams with a plaque.

Ms. Castleberry said that while she had hoped the building would be demolished, she was relieved that it would be moved from the city and she and others would not have to see it daily.

For those who wanted to preserve the building but also keep it in Smyrna, the outcome was only a partial victory. Susan Wilkinson, a City Council member who is white, said the community had only begun to learn about Ms. Williams and the value of educating residents about her legacy.

At a recent council meeting, Ms. Wilkinson argued that that mission would now be more difficult. “How do we preserve history when the physical space is no longer there?”

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