

Pine Gardens

National Registry Project

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4/26/2010



Figure 1-Pine Gardens Home, built in 1950's. Courtesy of Patricia Jenkins.

World War II is commonly referred to as "The Best War Ever." This war has been given credit for bringing America out of the Great Depression and catapulting America into its position as a world super power. America entered World War II a virtual nobody and exited as a world leader. This rise to greatness fueled the American spirit. This "Great War" helped the American economy hit its peak of industrialization and brought virtually every American into the war effort. As more workers moved into cities to join the work force a need for additional housing was created. In June 1940, President Roosevelt approved the National Housing for Defense Act, which authorized the War and Navy Departments and the United States Housing Authority to build housing as needed by the government as part of the preparedness program during World War II.¹ In Savannah, GA the Southeastern Shipbuilding Corporation was building Liberty Ships for the US Navy and to do this they employed an average of 15,000 Americans at any given time. Additional housing in the area was essential and to fill this need Pine Garden, Inc was organized in May 1942 to build houses for the employees of Southeastern Shipbuilding Corporation.

Southeastern Shipbuilding Corporation had a glorious run in its heyday and contributed significantly to the war effort through the building of Liberty Ships. The location of the shipyards was a key element in the success of the operation; located on a 2500 acre tract of land that was once



Figure 2-The launching of the Juliette Gordon Low Liberty Ship; Courtesy of the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace

the Brewton Hill rice plantation in the mid to late 1800's. This property provided easy access to the Savannah River that in turn fed into the Atlantic Ocean or was navigable further inland if needed. After the Civil War the area began to industrialize and the land was purchased by the Seaboard Coastline Railroad and later by Southeastern Shipbuilding.

Although in 1941 America was neutral in the war, the shipbuilders in

Savannah were building ships for the allied forces.

However, after the December 7, 1941 attacks on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent American declaration of war the Southeastern Shipbuilding Corporation was established to

build ships exclusively for the US Navy. In February 1942, the United States government originally contracted 36 Liberty Ships to be built at the Southeastern location in

Savannah. ² Through the years the Savannah shipyard built eighty-eight Liberty Ships, employed 46,766 Americans and paid out \$112,000,000 in payroll³, all of which went back in the economy in Savannah paving the way for the huge boom of home building and subsequent ownership that was made possible by the construction of Pine Gardens.



Figure 3-The Juliette Gordon Low Liberty Ship; Picture courtesy of Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace

Southeaster Shipbuilding was the center of the social order for its employees. There was a company band, two orchestras, two baseball teams, two basketball teams, golf tournaments and employee picnics. Southeaster Shipbuilding even held beauty contests and named one lucky woman Miss Southeastern⁴. There was even a company newsletter, *The Sou'Easter*, which highlighted company news, safety tips, entertainment, sporting events, birthdays, poetry by workers, accolades to employees and much

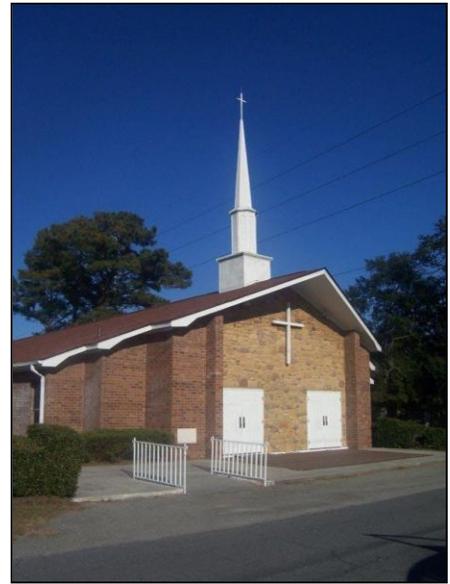


Figure 4-Riverside Baptist Church Today; Picture Courtesy of Patricia Jenkins

more. The Southeastern Shipbuilding Corporation was the driving force for the need for housing development in Savannah for 1,750 families working at the shipyards at any given time. The relationship between the Southeastern Shipbuilders Corporation and Pine Gardens can be likened to the early 1900's company towns that sprang up in industrialized areas all over the country. These company towns provided everything the workers needed in the contexts of housing, shopping, worship, entertainment and social bonding in return for loyal hard working laborers who were productive and happy. These "carefully constructed landscapes acted as a form of social engineering, synthesizing architecture, landscape, and planning into coherent images that embodied illusions of social unity and coherence during periods of dramatic social and economic change."⁵ While for the most part these company towns had ceased to

exist by the 1930's, the new housing communities built during the war effort bear a striking resemblance to these bygone company towns.

The original plan for Pine Gardens was to build 500 homes, but if more land could be obtained more would be built.⁶ "Our idea is the build a village that will not only be a model for Savannah, but for the entire country."⁷ Designed by DeYoung and Moscowitz from New York, two types of homes were planned; one was smaller units for unskilled laborers and larger ones for skilled workers. The smaller homes cost on average \$3,000 to \$3,500 to build and the payments were approximately \$20.18 per month. The larger homes cost around \$4,000 to build making payments around \$22.87 a month⁸. During the war the homes were rented to the workers but were eventually sold to interested buyers after the war

ended. The cost of the acquisition of the land to build the homes was \$40,000 and was to include a fire station, two churches, a business district, a recreation center and

a park⁹. Pine Gardens was designed as a grid of uniform rectangular blocks. Each

house faced either north or south and the rear of the lots are separated by alleys, as is common in Savannah. Each house was built as a single-family dwelling in the center of a 60 by 100 lot, with ample front yard and room for gardening and storage sheds in the rear of the lots¹⁰.



Figure 5-Penn Street Store; Picture courtesy of Pine Gardens National Registry Project

“The designs of the Pine Gardens’ houses reflected the economics, material shortages, and technological advancements of the era.”¹¹ To keep costs down basements, second stories, additional bathrooms and formal dining rooms were eliminated from the designs. The homes in Pine Gardens featured prefabricated balloon-frames on brick piers with ventilated brick skirting. This saved time and money allowing some 500 homes to be constructed in less than a year. Although many short cuts were taken to build the homes as quickly and inexpensively as possible, they were built of exceptional quality, featuring amenities such as attics, hardwood floors, shingled roofs and inviting porches. Moderately low-priced and quickly constructed, these homes were seen the saving grace of the housing shortage during the war efforts.

In addition to the houses in Pine Gardens a commercial area was built that housed the Colonial Grocery Store, The Penn Club bar, Rabhands’s 5 & 10 store, a soda shop, a beauty show, a barber shop and Bird’s grocery. Also in the neighborhood was a package shop and Burke’s Fuel. The Pine Gardens Firehouse was constructed in 1943, the Church of the Nazarene in 1954, Riverside Baptist Church in 1953 and Eli Whitney School in 1953.



Figure 6-Fire Station; Picture courtesy of Pine Gardens National Registry Project

While the businesses no longer remain, the Firehouse, Church of Nazarene, and Riverside Baptist still serve the community. Eli Whitney School’s structure still

stands; however, it is no longer used as a school, but as an administration building for the Chatham County Public Schools.

As Savannah was in the process of building Pine Gardens, as well as three other government funded apartment communities to house workers in Savannah, other areas of the country were experiencing housing shortages of significant levels¹². The Southeaster Shipbuilding's company newsletter, the Sou'Easter, reported on April 15, 1943 that Wilmington, NC lacked adequate sanitary facilities for workers; Charleston, SC faced serious social service problems; Mobile, AL had workers living in tent colonies and waiting in long lines for meals; San Francisco, CA was urging families who were not working in the war effort to move away so that more housing would be available; and finally San Pedro, CA

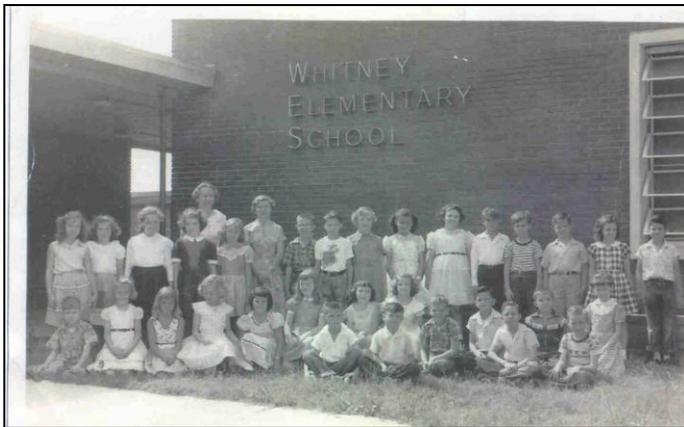


Figure 7-Children at Eli Whitney School; Picture courtesy of Pine Gardens National Registry Project

was experiencing a meat shortage which led to time lost by workers¹³. It can be said that the success of the Southeastern Shipbuilders and the Liberty Ships built in Savannah during World War II was possible due the development of these housing communities that allowed the workers

to have safe, adequate places to live while they worked for the war effort.

After the war ended and the shipyards closed, many of the workers for Southeastern went to work for other area businesses, including Union Bag, but

remained in the Pine Gardens neighborhood. This helped Pine Gardens cross over from a company town whose sole existence depended on the shipyard, to a prominent, settled 1950 style suburb of Savannah. Ahead of its time, the construction of Pine Gardens bridges a gap between the traditional company towns and the modern day suburbs that few company towns of this era were able to do. In addition to Pine Gardens, the War Department and the Savannah housing authority also built three apartment complexes near the Pine Gardens area to house the workers; Moses Rogers Grove, Josiah Tattnall Homes and Deptford Place all in 1943, none of which still exist. Also, two additional war housing neighborhoods modeled after Pine Gardens, Cherokee Homes and Augustine Park, were built in Savannah in 1943 to house shipyard workers for other companies; however Pine Gardens is the only one that still exists today¹⁴.



Figure 8-"Miss Southeastern Shipyard" during World War II; Picture courtesy of Pine Gardens National Registry Project

Pine Gardens unique history lies in the fact that it was able to not only survive, but thrive, in social and economic conditions that destroyed similar neighborhoods of this era. In 2002 a movement was started by residents who grew up in the Pine Gardens area to have this area listed on the National Registry for its value and historical significance not only to Savannah, but to the success of World War II. The national registry project for Pine Gardens has been spear headed by Charles Varner, Patricia Jenkins, Daisy Harrison and Dolly

Jeffers, lifelong residents of the Pine Gardens area and Professor David Rossell from Savannah College of Art and Design. To date the Pine Gardens Neighborhood Association has assembled a website (www.cvsolarbear.com/PGNNRP.htm) and held several community functions to build awareness and gain support for the National Registry nomination. In addition, they have involved several Savannah city officials and both the Chatham County and Historic Savannah Historical Societies in their efforts. Varner believes that since "Pine Gardens is the only neighborhood that still



**Figure 9-Church of Nazarene,
Courtesy of Patricia Jenkins**

remains intact it will make an excellent candidate for the National Registry.”¹⁵

In the National Register Nomination Form it states that "Pine Gardens deserves

recognition in terms of the individuals who lived

there, as well as the quality of the housing stock and the notable overall neighborhood plan. Residents directly served the war effort in construction Liberty Ships for Southeastern Shipbuilding Corporation and thereby helping in the historic effort to win World War II. The housing marks Savannah’s first use of large-scale federally-funded worker housing, built in a remarkable uniform manner utilizing the most progressive ideals in design, space planning and materials. The neighborhood shows the first use of master-planning integrating residences, commercial services, fire protection, as well as settings for religious

structures. It is the only neighborhood in Georgia and possibly the nation that served such purposes and is still largely intact."¹⁶

While Southeastern Shipyards boasts an impressive 88 Liberty Ships in less than 3 years, their true legacy is the community of Pine Gardens. Pine Gardens has evolved and become much more than defense housing to the



residents who have lived all their lives; family and friendships are the cornerstone for this community. "Pine Gardens epitomized the patriotism, and sacrifice necessary to win the war."¹⁷ Pine Gardens also symbolizes perseverance, hard work and family, all of which are still there today.

Figure 10-Southeastern Shipbuilders Workers after the launching of the Juliette Gordon Low Liberty Ship; Courtesy of the Juliette Gordon Low Birthplace

Endnotes

- ¹ F. Sutart Fitzpatrick, "Defense Housing," *The Journal of Land & Public Utility Economics* Vol 16 (Aug. 1940) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3158253> (accessed March 23, 2010)
- ² Charles Varner, "National Registry Nomination Form" (Nomination paperwork to be submitted, 2010)
- ³ C. Winn Upchurch, "A Brief History" *The Sou'Easter Newsletter*, November 1945
- ⁴ (Upchurch-Editor 1945)
- ⁵ Margaret Crawford, "the "New" Company Town," *Perspecta* Vol 30 (1999) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1567228> (accessed February 26, 2010)
- ⁶ Savannah Morning News writer, "Shipyard Buys 100-Acre Tract," *The Savannah Morning News* May 7, 1941 (accessed February 26, 2010)
- ⁷ (Savannah Morning News, Shipyard Buys 100-Acre Tract 1941)
- ⁸ (Savannah Morning News, Shipyard Buys 100-Acre Tract 1941)
- ⁹ (Savannah Morning News, Shipyard Buys 100-Acre Tract 1941)
- ¹⁰ (Varner 2010)
- ¹¹ (Varner 2010)
- ¹² (Upchurch-Editor 1945)
- ¹³ (Upchurch-Editor 1945)
- ¹⁴ (Varner 2010)
- ¹⁵ (Stamm 2010)
- ¹⁶ (Varner 2010)
- ¹⁷ (Varner 2010)

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