

In 1976 Dekalb County had become a Mecca or Oasis, if you will, for my people, as they had been limited to home ownership in South West Atlanta, as Dekalb County was the seat of the then infamous Stone Mountain, known for the KKK rallies, marches, cross burning and an occasional lynching, under the auspices of the 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment and the sponsorship of James Venable who was the imperial wizard of the ku klux klan. In his heydays he could rally thousands from all over the country and like so many of his allies were Hell-Bent on keeping Stone Mountain Lilly White and Blacks in “Sharmentown” and they all, no doubt, religiously thought, believed and said: “save your confederate money boys, cause the south’s gonna rise again”, thanks to the forthcoming southern manifesto.

1976 was also the year that I was getting very busy in the contracting business and we were getting a lot of referrals from Real Estate companies and agents because I had found a niche that gave us an edge on our competitors. We would do whatever work was needed and take back a 2<sup>nd</sup> mortgage that was due and payable at closing or within 30 days, whichever came first. The agents loved us and the homeowner always gave us a little token at closing and everybody was happy and we made a bundle, because .90% of the houses listed had some deferred maintenance or just some sprucing up to give it “curb-appeal” so that it would have an edge because it seemed like ever other house on the street was on the market because “them blacks was coming” and the property value was going down. The crime was going up and the whites was running and ready to take the 1<sup>st</sup> offer even if they lost money and “Block Busting” was rampant and I must admit that we had a number of whites that just let us assume their FHA or VA loan with no money down to save their credit. They just walked away rather than live next to blacks and that pattern continued thru the late 70’s.

I was getting swamped trying to run 3-4 jobs at a time, so when Virginia got her 2 weeks off for Christmas at Atlanta University she didn’t go back and we decided to get an office and go all out. We had saw a office space for rent sign at True Value hardware at Columbia & Glenwood (3-4 blocks from home) and we talked to Mr. Smart the owner and he had 3 spaces for rent upstairs and we picked the two room office suite for \$150.00 a month including utilities. We ordered a phone and went downtown to

a used office furniture place and bought 2 desk for \$40.00 each and 2 office chairs for \$15.00 each and some guest chairs for \$5.00 each and we were in business.

In January 1977 shortly after New Years we opened the doors with new cards and the office address and business phone number and we never looked back. The boys were in school all day and Virginia was running the office, I was working and we had an answering service for \$20.00 a month and I had a pager. From day one Virginia has always been that “never meet a stranger” type and she just had a personality that was very charming, and she always managed to get just what she wanted and she never took no for an answer. Now that was a Black commercial construction Company in the building and their office was a couple of doors down from ours and Virginia saw the owners wife in the office and walked in and introduced herself and told her the we were in the home improvement business and had just moved in the building while they were talking the lady shared the fact with Virginia that they got work from the city of Atlanta and Dekalb Co. and she asked Virginia if we were on the list of approved contractors. She asked how do we get on the list and she told Virginia to go to the Associated Contractors on Maynard Terrace and fill out an application and you’ll be on the bid list. Virginia called the Associated Contractors and they told her what to bring and “come-on-down.” Virginia got everything together and went down as if she was the contractor and she did not tell me anything until she got back and had us approved on the Atlanta bid list and they told her they would be calling us to bid on some houses in the next 10 days, and I owe it all to her. Herb Williams called us the next week to do a walk through along with four other contractors and bid on five houses and the bids had to be in within 7 days and they would have a bid opening 3 days later with all the contractors present. These were block grants from the federal government and they would loan a homeowner up to \$5,000.00 to make necessary improvements to bring their home up to code and 20% was forgiven per year. If they stayed in their home for the full five years the loan was forgiven and if the sold the home earlier the payoff was prorated. On the first bid opening we got two houses that needed plumbing, electrical, roofing and carpentry, which was no big deal to us because we had been doing that since 1970 and we had accounts at West Building material and Williams Brothers, cause Home Depot and Lowe’s were not born yet and we had our subs and Anderson Clark (black) was the license plumber and Rickey

Benton (black) was the license electrician. We had three white boys from Porterdale, Ga. (near Covington) who would tear off and replace any roof in two days so it was a “cake walk.” They allowed us 21 days per house for completion with 4-5 rainy days and we finished both house in 14 days and they came out and did the inspection and the check was cut within 2-3 days after inspection. Of course Virginia went down to pick up the 10 grand and she was real sassy because as had always been our policy, she had paid the subs as they complete their work and brought a copy of the permit signed off by the City of Atlanta Inspector to the office. My wife, my lover, my friend and now my business partner was and was to become invaluable in our business endeavours and the best thing she could have ever done was to quit her hourly job and become joint partners in our Real Estate and Home Improvement business and they go hand in hand.

On March 15, 1977 we bought an investment property at 1269 Boulevard Dr. and bought another house on Latona Dr. in Atlanta and on July 12, 1977 we bought a house at 2268 Shamrock Dr. from Mrs. Miriam Nelson Redfern for \$28,000 and it was ½ block from Saratoga and much larger and it had 3 bedrooms, 2 ½ baths, a formal Living room, dining room and a 20 X 20 family room with a wet bar. So we sold Saratoga and moved about 200 yards. Things were going just great in 1977 and we made \$50,000 from our Home Improvement business + the houses we sold and I bought an 18 ft. boat and a Motor Home and bought Virginia a 1974 Cadillac and we drove the 69 Champion motor home that slept 8 to Disney World and other places in Florida. We also went to Cape Canaveral and we spent about a week in Florida and we all enjoyed it very much as that was the first real vacation that we all had ever had.

From 1978 thru 1982 we bought 12 houses and sold 2 and took out 2<sup>nd</sup> mortgages on a number of them and in 1978 we made \$250,000. We also got on the approved Contractors list in Dekalb County, which had been rather slow to let blacks get a piece of the action. Now Dekalb County had a program commonly called the dollar house, which was a fact that Hud gave the houses to Dekalb County because they needed major work and Dekalb County awarded the houses to homeowners by lottery for \$1.00 and the county made low interest loans from Hud Block Grants to the homeowners in the amount of up to \$35,000 and we only got on the list because we had a track record in Atlanta doing Hud work, and we still practically had to jump through hoops for the white

folks and some of the inspectors were still in the pre civil war days...but thanks to the fortitude (again) of my lovely wife we prevailed because I was ready to cuss those rednecks out. Every time she carried them something they asked for something else (in bits and pieces) until she went to the top and said: Tell me everything that you want to complete our application or should we go directly to Hud and he said: “Mrs. High I believe you have everything and you should be getting bids in the next 10 days.” We did not know it at that time but we were among the first (if not the 1<sup>st</sup>) black to get on the approved contractors list in Dekalb County. The next week we got a call to come down and pick up a bid and we got the bid and looked at the house and gave a bid of \$25,400 and we do not know how many contractors bid on the house, but the director called and said that we had the low bid but \$25,000 was the maximum they could loan on that house so if we could shave our bid by \$500 – \$600, we could sign the contract today and we made the price \$24,800.00. Now these were loans and the homeowners had to pay the money back and although the county inspectors wrote up the list of things that were to be done, the homeowners had an allowance for cabinets, counter tops, light fixtures, carpet, paint colours and it was pretty much like building a new house. It was a challenge dealing with those women, so Virginia picked them up and carried them to the vendors in plenty time so there was not any hold ups and we would just pick up the material and install it. I also discovered that Virginia had a natural ability for decorating so she was much more valuable than I thought. We had a list of subs and they were 100% professional and we always paid our subs when they finished and not have them wait until the jobs were completed. We had an excellent reputation with our vendors, employees and sub contractors and we never started a job that we could not finish in a timely manner. We did very well with Dekalb County and were also doing private jobs and still doing houses for the city of Atlanta. 1978 and 1979 were great years and we made over \$300,000.00 + so we were “on a roll” and could not see any end in sight. Everything we touched turned to gold.

We had outgrown the 2 office suites above the hardware store so On May 12, 1980 we bought a house on Candler road zoned O & I because Candler Road was also State Highway 155 and had recently been widened to 4 lanes. We had excellent frontage and rear parking and we had 3 offices, a reception area, kitchen and lounging

area. I painted the inside before we moved in and Virginia said that we need a new name so I thought of Dekalb Home Improvement and Virginia said Metro Home Improvement Co. I was talking to a Real Estate Broker and friend, Johnny Fogle and told him about the name and he said why not Georgia Home Improvement Company and I told Virginia and she said “that’s it” and till this day that name and that Company is still in business operated by our son George W. High Jr. We got the name Registered and later incorporated in 1981. We moved in and business was so good, and Virginia was busy and bookkeeping and accounting were too much for her so she had a accountant named Al Featherstone ( from England) to come in twice a week and do the book keeping. That would free her up so she could have more time to spend with the customers and help them select carpet, lighting fixtures, appliances, window treatment and etc. Virginia also said that we could afford a receptionist so we got a one.

In the summer of 1980 I got a Call from Herb Williams and he said that a man named Herbert Decosta had called him about him referring a local contractor to restore the Herndon Mansion, so he called me and said that Mr. Decosta was in Atlanta and wanted to meet with me tomorrow (Saturday). I called Mr. Decosta and he said he would meet me at my office at 9:00 Saturday. Virginia and I got to the office About 8:30 and he arrived about 8:50 and came in and introduced himself and explained that the Herndon Foundation wanted him to restore the mansion in southwest Atlanta. He was too busy doing restoration in Charleston, but he would work as a consultant with us and assist in the project. He told me that he understood that I had not done any restoration but he understood that we had an excellent reputation for craftsmanship and had a full staff and dependable subcontractors. He told me that the restoration was expected to exceed \$700,000.00 and our Company could be assured of getting over half of that amount and the job was expected to last about 12-14 months. Mr. Decosta said that he would get with Mr. Jesse Hill and Mr. Brown and he’ll be back in the next week, we’ll go over and get an idea what needs to be done and he left. Virginia and I were so excited because we had been chosen for this project.

The Herndon Home was completed in 1910 and was the residence of Alonzo Herndon and his family. Herndon was a former slave raised in a sharecropping family after the Civil War. Herndon studied barbering, and owned and managed a string

of barbershops in downtown Atlanta after the Civil War, one of which was considered to be the most elegant in the country with marble floors and chandelier. Investing his income into real estate, Herndon became the largest black property owner in Atlanta by 1900. Later, Herndon founded the Atlanta Life Insurance Company, located in the Sweet Auburn Avenue Historic District and became Atlanta's first black millionaire. Adrienne Herndon, Alonzo's first wife and a teacher at Atlanta University, primarily designed the home. The couple had one son, Norris. Adrienne died of Addison's disease just three months after the home was completed. In 1912 Alonzo married Jessie Gillespie.

The Herndon home is a two-story, 15-room Beaux Arts mansion built by local black craftsmen. The formally composed building is constructed with multi-colored brick, and features a two-story entry portico supported by Corinthian columns. One-story porches to each side of the building echo this theme in brick piers and wooden capitals. An elliptical fanlight over the main entrance and the balustrade above the full entablature of the building's cornice add a distinctly Georgian Revival flavor to this imposing residence. The Herndon Home is a lasting tribute to the hard work and talent of extraordinary African Americans in Atlanta, and was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2000. After Alonzo's death in 1927, Norris assumed the presidency of Atlanta Life Insurance, with Jessie as vice president. During this period the company experienced its greatest growth. Norris lived in the Herndon Home for much of his life, and filled it with many decorative arts from his travels to Europe, as well as keeping his parents original furnishings. Shortly after Jessie died in 1947, Norris established the Alonzo F. and Norris B. Herndon foundation, a charitable trust which operates the home today as a museum recounting this family's phenomenal rise from slavery to leadership of the nation's black business community. Norris died in 1977.

Virginia and I were awe struck because we knew that we were now playing in the major league, but we were not about to abandon the ship that brought us over, which was our long time clients i.e. City of Atlanta, Dekalb County, the Real Estate Companies and the Real Estate Agents. Of course by this time the Block-Busting was long gone, but I must say it was nice while it lasted.

Mr. Decosta called me the next week and said he was at his daughter's house in Decatur and wanted me to pick him up the next day (Friday) morning

at 9:30. I picked up Mr. Decosta and I drove out to the mansion and met with the Architect, Mr. Norman D. Askins and the structural engineer, Mr. Doug Menne, and Ms. Porter who was the housekeeper for Mr Norris B. Herndon while he was living and stayed on. We also met Mr. Henry who was Mr. Herndon's chauffer, valet and confidant, who still lived in the garage apartment and who would later become a thorn in our side. He acted as if Mr. Herndon was still alive and he was obligated to carry out his wishes, but more about Mr. Henry later.

Mr. Decosta, Mr. Adkins, Mr Menne and I spent about 2-3 hours together going over the plans and the strategy that would be implemented so that the work would be properly coordinated because this was a major overtaking, as the original furnishing was just as it was the day Mr. Herndon passed in 1977. There would be work done in every room in the house. It was mutually agreed that I would be the on sight coordination or the liaison because Mr. Decosta would visit the jobsite for the most part every other week and Mr. Askins lived in Atlanta and so did Mr. Menne. Georgia Home Improvement would in fact be the General Contractor with about 10-15 employees on sight at any given time. We coordinated with Ms. Porter and we all agreed that the first thing we should do is to have a moving company to pack up all the furnishing and personal items and store them until the work was completed. Ms. Porter said that she wanted me and/or my wife to have some of our trusted employee, work with her to set up a system whereas we would do one room at a time and label and pack all of the small items and note on each box what it contain and we would put labels on the large items noting which room they came from. Virginia also suggested that we photograph the contents of each room for insurance purpose, before starting to pack. Ms. Porter was very easy to work with and the packing and moving everything out was a 2 week project with 5-6 people working 6-8 hours a day, and I might add that the Herndon Foundation was not counting

pennies and they demanded quality at every stage and accepted nothing less.

Georgia Home Improvement did the exterior painting of the mansion and most of the interior. Also the interior and exterior painting of the garage and apartment. We also had to build the stairway from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor to the roof because Mr. Norris had them removed and installed an elevator. We removed the arched portico on the east side

because Doug Menne had discovered in his initial inspection that the columns had no concrete footing and were sitting on Georgia Clay and one of the columns looked like the leaning tower of pizza. All of the brick and concrete work was done by Richard Shabazz, who was a master craftsman and one who took pride in his work. Now Mr. Henry gave us all a fit and was forever calling Mr. Brown and Mr. Jessie Hill about one thing or another that we did and how Mr. Herndon would not have been pleased with it. As Richard started removing the arched portico, Mr. Henry just went off and stormed in the house and a few minutes later one of the workers called Richard and he went inside and Mr., Henry was on the kitchen floor dead and Richard called the police and I was on an errand and returned in about 15 minutes. We all regretted Mr. Henry's passing but after which everyone was able to get some work done without any obstructions. We also removed the entire roof system and installed a new one. We turned the dungeon of a basement into a thing of beauty and poured 3" of concrete over the entire floors and built 4-5 rooms. We replaced quite a bit of deteriorated wood on the exterior of the house and garage and also replaced the roof on the garage. We had 19 mahogany doors special ordered from a mill in Charleston to replace most of the interior 7 feet doors. There were about 15-20 balustrades and a good bit of the building's cornice that needed replacing. It was all sheet metal and had rusted out, so I took a perfect specimen to a fabricating company and asked them if they could make one and the fabricator asked me where did they go and I said on the roof about 35-40 feet up. He said why not do them in plastic and they won't rust, crack or chip and would be ½ the cost. He made me a template and I showed it to Doug Menne, Norman Askin and Mr. Decosta and they were all thrilled and pleased and I asked if we should show it to Mr. Brown or Jessie Hill and he (not saying who) said hell no and lets go with it because what they don't know won't hurt them. I expect that every time they look up they think the balustrade are all sheet metal. We had to get crane to put the air condition on the roof. All of the area between the back of the house and garage was concrete and most of it had to be replaced. Early on when we were packing furniture I hired my brother Donald who had been an entertainer, as a foreman and when he started he didn't know a 2 X 4 from a piece of sheetrock. I bought a new 1979 Ford F150 long bed truck for him to pick up material and he had an accident in the truck going over to Simpson & Ashby to "play his number". He didn't have enough sense

to tell a lie about what happened, and Virginia and I still laugh about that to this day although it was just a noticeable dent on the back fender.

When we were about half finished the mansion in early 1981, we had outgrown the house on Candler Rd. and I had talked to Mr. Smart who owned the hardware store and he said I have just the place for you downstairs and it has a drive in garage around back with about 800 sq. ft. of storage space a reception area, 5 offices and it also has a front entrance and you and Mrs. High don't need a deposit because y'all pay like the ATM, and he smiled. I looked at it and liked it very much and Virginia saw it and said, that's it and the rent was only \$350.00 and Virginia wrote him a check and said we'll start moving this weekend, because we had a lady, Mrs. Fears who was worrying us to death about the Candler Rd. property for a beauty shop. Virginia called her and she said: I'll bring you the deposit and the 1<sup>st</sup> month rent in 30 minutes and will be ready to start moving this weekend, and Virginia said "Sounds good to me."

We completed the restoration around October of 1981 and there was a semi formal reception for the board of Directors of the Herndon foundation, the officers of the Atlanta Life, Herbert Decosta, Doug Menne, Norman Askins, Virginia and me, Ms. Porter and a host of other official from the city of Atlanta who all took a tour.

The total cost of the restoration exceeded \$850,000.00 and Georgia Home Improvement grossed almost \$500,000.00 during 80 and 81 + we made a "bundle" from real estate during that same period. We turned in draws about every 3-4 weeks during the course of the job which included costs for labour, material, and we added back 20% overhead and 20% profit, so it was certainly a win-win for us.

After we finished the Herndon Mansion, we had a big nest egg and we started to sell houses and do owner financing which proved to be very lucrative because most of the houses in our area were non qualifying and non escalating FHA and/or VA so the order of the day was "good credit, bad credit and no credit" and who-so-ever will, let them come. None would be turned away if they had a down payment of \$5,000.00 or more, and we often did a split down-payment, if they passed muster. Virginia and I had the deciding vote. Some times we would do a wrap-a-round mortgage and other times we would let the buyer assume the 1<sup>st</sup> mortgage and take back a 2<sup>nd</sup> mortgage and if the need arrives for some quick \$\$\$, then we could sell part of, or the entire second for 70-80

cents on the dollar depending how seasoned the mortgage was. We did quite well in the secondary market and I might add that we had 27 houses rented at one time and most of them were on section "8", and that was in the good-old-days, when there was a lot of tenants and very few houses for rent and the tenants had their vouchers when they looked at the house.

On February 2, 1982, we bought our first luxury home on Pine Springs Manor, which was a Colonial brick with 6 bedrooms, 4 ½ bath, living room, dining room, family room w/fireplace, large den w/ wet bar, ½ basement w/fireplace, double garage, screen porch and deck, and Virginia could not have been happier and she said : "we worked hard to get it and we deserve it."