

Athens Banner Herald

UGA uncovers and restores historic downtown stream

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University of Georgia workers have revealed a little piece of Athens history, restoring a stretch of a small stream that flows from the spring the city's founders built the town around.

The spring itself remains underground, buried beneath a University of Georgia building just off Spring Street, which may have gotten its name from the little spot that still pours out clean, cool water.

But along a stretch of stream beside the street, workers have cleared away a century's worth of debris and ballast to reveal a sliver of rocky outcrop and a miniature wetland where hardy crayfish still live.

Where the landscape once was littered with beer cans, workers have planted more than 1,000 individual specimens of native grasses as well as plants with names like spiraling ladies' tresses, monkey flower and meadow beauty.

The exposed and restored section of the stream, pressed between the street and an asphalt parking lot, flows only a little more than 100 feet. But one day, much more will emerge from under the asphalt, hope UGA officials like Dexter Adams, head of UGA's grounds department.

Years probably will pass before the project reveals the spring and more of the stream, said UGA Campus Architect Danny Sniff.

But one day, Town Spring will take its place beside such other iconic UGA landmarks as the Chapel bell, the Broad Street Arch and the iron fence around UGA's North Campus, Sniff said.

Adams, Sniff and others for years have wanted to restore the area, at least the little stretch of stream that was not covered with asphalt long ago.

Like many downtown streams, little Town Stream mostly is hidden from view now, covered over and pushed through pipes, effectively a part of the Athens storm sewer system that catches runoff from downtown concrete and asphalt.

But when Athens first was built as the home of the University of Georgia more than 200 years ago, the area was a rocky outcrop that may have looked something like Rock and Shoals, a granite outcrop on the edge of Athens that's considered one of the premier natural areas remaining in the state.

The spring was Athens' primary water source for decades after the city was founded, according to a report the Nutter & Associates consulting firm prepared for UGA four years ago, long before the Town Spring restoration project began.

The area once was a campground where visitors to Athens parked their wagons and spread tables laden with mouthwatering food for sale - watermelon, chicken pies, fried chicken, ginger cakes and lemonade, according to Augustus Longstreet Hull's Annals of Athens.

But in the latter part of the 19th century, when Athens had other water sources, the spring and the area around it were lost under asphalt, concrete and business buildings.

UGA planners did not try to map out the entire restoration before they started, said Jennifer Perissi, the landscape designer in UGA's grounds department who has coordinated the restoration.

Instead, Perissi, Adams and others have taken it one step at a time, waiting as the stream revealed itself as workers removed the decades of debris that had accumulated in the area.

"We knew the (railroad) tracks were under the sod, and we wanted to uncover that just to show the cultural and industrial cycle," Perissi said.

But no one expected to see the rocky shoals that emerged beside the little stream as they cleaned the muck away, she said.

On the other side of the stream from the shoals, workers uncovered part of a cobblestone street now overlaid with about six inches of asphalt.

Perissi, Adams and Sniff said they've been surprised by how many people have stopped to ask questions and share stories during the restoration.

Sniff said one story he's heard is that legendary UGA Dean William Tate used to come down to the spring once a year to fill up a cup and drink the clear water.

"It seems to resonate somehow with people," Adams said of the spring restoration.