

The 'full circle' trees

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For 100 years, they were perhaps the tallest living things on Peachtree Street: two 70-foot basswood trees at the corner of 14th Street, totems of Atlanta history that saw their city become a boomtown.

Like other local treasures, they came down to make way for development, in this case the new mirrored Midtown skyscraper 1180 Peachtree, which in March will become the new home of the King & Spalding law firm.

But the building's developers and some local arts patrons managed to spare the old trees from the chipper. Today they're far from home but mostly intact -- a set of enormous, toppled pieces rolled under a shed on a cotton farm in White Plains, between Atlanta and Augusta.

The spot where they rest, next to a listless pickup truck and a collection of antique farm tractors, could be the loneliest, quietest place in Georgia. In the next few years, however, the trees are due for a noisy, high-profile comeback.

Hines, the Houston developer that built 1180 Peachtree, and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra plan to have the trees' wood fashioned into one of the loudest things Atlanta may ever see, or hear: the massive, \$3.3 million pipe organ planned for the new symphony hall.

"It comes full circle," said Dona Humphreys, an orchestra board member. The trees, in some form, will return to their original site to be "used in something highly prized by the symphony."

Basswood is not rare or precious. Toy makers use it for model airplanes, and Scouts whittle blocks of it into miniature derby racers.

But it's just the right timber for a musical instrument, Humphreys said. The

organ's designer, chosen after a meticulous search, plans to use the wood in the instrument's casing, which will be visible to the audience.

"Everyone wanted to preserve the history of the trees," Humphreys said.

But there's still another ring in the circular homecoming tale of the 14th Street trees.

Several generations ago, when that end of Midtown was an exurb, Jack Spalding, the founder of King & Spalding, planted both trees in what was his home's front yard, the same place where the law firm's new office tower sits today.

"It's a total coincidence" that the firm is leasing offices where its founding partner once lived, said Mason Stephenson, King & Spalding's Atlanta managing partner. "Our history is tied to the history of Atlanta. It's a special touch to have something like this tying it all together."

King & Spalding, which has been Coca-Cola's legal counsel since 1923, has its share of local lore. Former U.S. Sen. Sam Nunn and former U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell have been partners there. John Sibley, another firm member, headed a commission that helped integrate Georgia's public schools in the 1960s. Sibley's son, Horace, helped organize Atlanta's Olympic bid and has guided Mayor Shirley Franklin's mission to help the homeless.

When Spalding planted his saplings, before 1900, his law firm was a modest operation. In the first days of their partnership, Spalding and Alex King kept a tiny office near Peachtree Street downtown. They took turns coming in early to light a fire and secreted their proceeds in an office drawer.

When King & Spalding moves into 17 floors at 1180 Peachtree in March, it will have 830 lawyers in Atlanta and at offices in Washington, New York, Houston and London.

Jack Spalding eventually left his 14th Street house for a new one where Piedmont Hospital now stands. In the 1930s, National Service Industries built a headquarters where the 14th Street house had stood.

Hines, the Texas developer, and the Woodruff Arts Center each bought part of the 14th Street property in 1999, with plans for a new Symphony Hall and a commercial project, which evolved into the 1180 skyscraper.

In 2002, Hines retold the Spalding history -- and even presented a photograph of the old homestead -- to persuade the law firm to anchor the 1180 Peachtree building, said John Robbins, a Hines project manager. The message was "good real estate then ... great real estate today," he said.

But after the firm signed the lease, as the project moved forward, it became clear that Jack Spalding's trees, which had become unhealthy over the years, couldn't be saved, Robbins said.

Most trees cleared in the name of development become sawdust. But several people argued that Spalding's trees should be salvaged, including Robbins' boss at the time, former Hines Vice President Bob Voyles, whose wife, Belle, is a descendant of Jack Spalding, and Sam Williams, president of the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce.

Both Voyles and Williams are amateur woodworkers.

"People come at you from many directions when you talk about wood," said Voyles. "People are passionate about it."

Based on those appeals, Hines elected to save the wood and paid a crew to remove the trees in July 2003. Teams loaded both trunks onto an 18-wheel truck and hauled them to their current home, on Roy Ashley's farm.

Ashley, a longtime Atlanta land planner and the landscape architect for the 1180 Peachtree project, has become the trees' landlord. He grew up near the White Plains farm and today uses a cabin and workshop there as his weekend escape.

In the last two years, Hines and the ASO have paid Ashley a small storage fee, but largely it's something he does "out of the kindness of his heart," Robbins said.

The trees may need to rely on Ashley's kindness for a while longer. Ground won't be broken for Atlanta's new "postcard" symphony hall, with its grand organ, until patrons can raise about \$300 million to build it. Humphreys, the orchestra board member, hopes that can happen by 2008, but a more conservative guess is 2011. So far, the orchestra has raised about \$103 million.

But the organ, the trees' ultimate destination, is already paid for. The family

of the late John Conant, an Atlanta check-printing executive, agreed in April to finance most of its construction.

All that the organ, the orchestra and a storied pile of basswood logs need is a permanent home.

"It would have been a shame to see these big, beautiful trees" destroyed, said Robbins, the Hines project manager. But hopefully, he said, a way has been found "to have some memento from the trees and show some respect for the lives they lived."