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## Legacy of change

Herman J. Russell's rise to the top of the construction business mirrored the progress of blacks in Atlanta

By John McCosh  
*For Celebrating Diversity*

By the time Herman J. Russell sought his first construction loan in 1959, he had already created a solid foundation for the bank to say "yes."

For African-Americans in Atlanta in those days, that was no small accomplishment. Homes in more than a few Atlanta neighborhoods still had deed restrictions that prohibited sales to "Negroes."

But when Russell, then 29, walked into the now-defunct Home Savings and Loan on Forsyth Street, he carried with him a solid balance sheet and other paperwork that reflected his habit of saving and his growing ability to turn bare tracts of red clay into income-producing apartments. He was hoping for a \$14,000 loan to start a new project.



JEAN SHIFRIN/Special  
From the balcony of his office, longtime developer Herman J. Russell looks over residential and retail areas that he has redeveloped in Castleberry Hill.

"An older, white man took me back in an office and asked me what I wanted," said Russell, now 76. "I gave him my papers, and then he took me to the president. The president asked me what church I went to, and then he said, 'We will get back to you in a couple of days.' He sort of adopted me, and I never had to worry about borrowing after that."

Russell's handiwork is easy to find in Atlanta. Turner Field, the Georgia Dome, the Georgia World Congress Center, Coca-Cola headquarters and Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport are a few of the prominent projects that H.J. Russell & Co. helped build.

But Russell is most proud of his affordable housing developments. When he was 30, he said, he owned about 100 apartments.

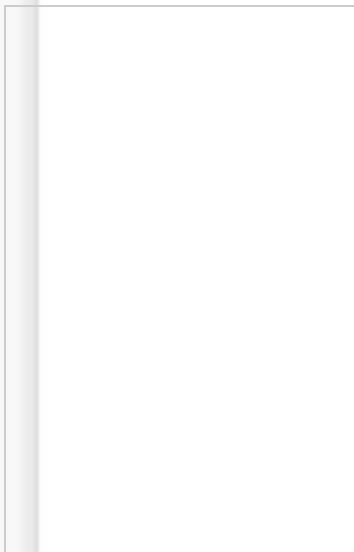
"I always kept two or three buildings going" at the same time, he said.

That deliberate approach and dedicated work ethic turned H.J. Russell & Co. into one of the largest minority-owned construction companies in the country. He officially retired from the company in late 2003, but, for Russell, retirement means overseeing the redevelopment of several blocks in Castleberry Hill.

"When I semi-retired, I thought I would be working about six-hour days, but now it's more like 11 hours," Russell

said. "But I used to work 46 hours a week, so that's not too bad."

mindful of the journey he and other African-Americans have taken. The illustration shows a young, black schoolgirl being escorted past a wall with a racial epithet written on it.



In the 1960s, Russell helped get his friend Martin Luther King Jr. out of jail during the civil rights movement. Russell was the first black member of the Atlanta Chamber of Commerce, and he helped Maynard Jackson get elected Atlanta's first black mayor.



JEAN SHIFRIN/Special  
Russell

Russell made a long, steady climb from his hardscrabble upbringing during the Great Depression in the Summerhill neighborhood, which is next to Turner Field.

His father was a subcontractor who did brick and mason work, and he often brought young Herman to work with him. Even before that, Russell embraced a strong work ethic, shining shoes and delivering The Atlanta Constitution.

By the time he was 16, Russell was a master mason and had bought his first piece of property, a small plot near Grant Park that had been abandoned by the city of Atlanta. When he graduated from Bass High School, he headed to Tuskegee University in Alabama. But when he came home to Atlanta, Russell and a friend worked to finish building a duplex they had started on the Grant Park lot.

That duplex was the start of something big.

Because Russell had saved his money since the days he delivered newspapers, he soon had enough to buy another lot -- this one in Summerhill. He built a duplex there and then added two more units.

In 1952, he incorporated H.J. Russell & Co. In 1956, he built a two-bedroom house with a basement for his new bride, Otelia, and him to live in. "That place was like a palace to me," he said.

By 1960, the company employed 15 people. Up to that point, Russell had focused on building in the African-American community, because formal and informal restrictions kept him out of white areas.

"Back in those days, most white people wouldn't sell to black folks," Russell said.

In order for his company to grow, he would have to find a way around that.

Enter Jim Coclin, a Greek friend and partner who helped Russell buy land all over Georgia. Together, through programs offered by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, they built nearly 30 apartment complexes across the state.

"I would help buy the land, with the rezoning, the permitting -- you name it," Coclin said.

The two men have traveled the world together and share a mutual admiration.

"Herman is a brilliant man and one of the most hard-working I've ever seen," Coclin said. "And if you're brilliant and hard-working, it's hard not to be successful."

Russell said all his success and philanthropic efforts can be traced back to the struggles of growing up.

"I was a have-not child born in Summerhill, and I know what it's like to go to the dinner table with no meat," he said. "I never went hungry, but we had chicken on Sunday and fish on Friday. And I know what it's like to have worn[out] shoes, so your feet were cold on a cold day. So I'm glad to give jobs to people, and I have to give back. It's a moral obligation."

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**NAIL THE INTERVIEW**

The advertisement features a vertical layout. At the top, the title 'CAN YOU NAIL THE INTERVIEW?' is written in large, bold, black capital letters. Below the title, a short paragraph of text describes the game, mentioning 'ajcjobs.com' and the idea of 'talking trash to your friends'. The middle section contains a cartoon illustration of three people: a man in a grey suit and tie on the left, a man in a blue button-down shirt in the center, and a woman in a red top on the right. At the bottom of the illustration is a logo for 'ajcjobs.com' with the text 'NAIL THE INTERVIEW' below it.