

LOCAL

No signs or students: The curious case of what was SCAD's Clarence Thomas Center

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The Savannah College of Art and Design refuses to say how or if the university is using the historic downtown building that was the "Clarence Thomas Center for Historic Preservation," following the removal of student courses from the tax-exempt structure in 2021. In fact, the university is reluctant to even acknowledge the building's existence, or say whether the art of the late Savannah artist and educator, Virginia Jackson Kiah, is still displayed there.

It has been about a year since SCAD removed the sign for what was then the "Clarence Thomas Center for Historic Preservation." Located outside the 115-year-old building at 439 East Broad St., the sign's removal received plenty of press coverage, although the university refused to offer an explanation for the decision.

SCAD took the sign down after the building's namesake, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, helped overturn Roe vs. Wade, while calling for similar measures against rulings protecting same-sex marriage and the right to contraception. What wasn't reported at the time was that SCAD had previously moved Preservation Design program courses from the building to what is now Clark Hall at 229 Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.

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Name dropping

The move from the Clarence Thomas Center in 2021 came about five years after the program's name was changed from Historic Preservation to Preservation Design and followed a sharp drop in the number of program faculty and students. Now, that the Clarence Thomas building is apparently closed, according to a recent version of the university's Web page for building hours. (The center has since been removed from the Web page, following a media inquiry, but you can see a screen shot from early June below.) The building is also no longer listed in the fact book, as it was in the 2014 version.

The accessibility of the building takes on more importance due to the fact that art of the late Savannah artist and educator Virginia Jackson Kiah was displayed there, although SCAD will not say whether that remains the case. SCAD did not respond to multiple requests for information concerning the building's name, closure and use or whereabouts of Kiah's art. Meanwhile, the building, with an appraised value of almost \$1.4 million, continues to be exempt from property taxes as an educational facility for the nonprofit university, as indicated by the 2023 property record card.

Located in the former convent where Thomas spent his early years attending school, SCAD purchased the property that was to become the Clarence Thomas Center for \$1.56 million in 2004, according to property records. The building was constructed in 1908 and rehabilitated for SCAD's Historic Preservation Department in 2009, according to a Jan. 2010 Historic District Board of Review staff report, when installation of the Clarence Thomas sign was approved.

Thomas attended the building's naming ceremony after being flown in by real estate mogul Harlan Crow, as reported in this 2022 Savannah Morning News article about the sign's removal. Thomas has been under scrutiny after more recent news reports came out about Crow providing him with luxury trips for decades, while also buying multiple Savannah properties to one day establish a museum in his honor.

From preservation to design

The Preservation Design program enrolled nine undergraduate and 16 graduate students in 2022, compared to 24 undergraduates and 40 graduates in 2018, according to SCAD's fact book, while the university reported that the Historic Preservation program

had 30 undergraduate students and 64 graduate students in 2014. The Preservation Design program's Web page lists two faculty members. In 2014, the university listed nine Historic Preservation professors, as shown in an archived SCAD faculty Web page. The Historic Preservation major curriculum included 80 credit hours in 2015, while the current Preservation curriculum includes 70 credit hours.

A number of former Historic Preservation students expressed dismay via a SCAD Preservation Facebook page following the program changes and loss of instructors. Many questioned what "Preservation Design" meant and raised concerns about the loss of "hands-on" course work.

Parker McDonald is one of the last students to earn a Historic Preservation degree from SCAD, after graduating in 2016, the year the program was changed to Preservation Design. McDonald praised the program, which he said provided him with the knowledge and skills he needed to obtain preservation-related careers and eventually launch his own business, PMCD Historic Windows LLC.

"On the other hand, I hope for future students that they can find the same benefits and help as I did," he said.

SCAD issued a statement about the Preservation Design program on June 27, claiming it was moved to Clark Hall, the home of the School of Building Arts, "to continue to facilitate real-world collaboration opportunities", while omitting any reference to the Clarence Thomas Center or the building's status.

"As with all of SCAD's top ranked degree programs, the preservation design curriculum is constantly being evaluated by academic leadership to reflect industry needs and standards," the statement said. "The innovative development in the curriculum reflects those needs and prepares our talented students for creative careers."

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Growth of historic preservation program at Savannah Technical College

Some of the former Historic Preservation instructors from SCAD's program went on to teach at Savannah Technical College, which claims to have the only public hands-on Historic Preservation program in Georgia and be one of seven such institutions in the U.S. Connie Pinkerton now heads STC's Historic Preservation department after earning her MFA degree in Historic Preservation from SCAD and working as an instructor there from 2002 to 2016 — leaving before the program became Preservation Design.

Pinkerton said there is a lot of demand for historic preservation graduates and STC's program, which has been around since 2008, is a great way to land a career in the field.

"Especially in Savannah and the Savannah area," she said.

In "Georgia's State Historic Preservation Plan 2022-2026", prepared by the Historic Preservation Division of the Georgia Department of Community Affairs, the authors cite Savannah Technical College's program for helping to address a lack of practitioners of traditional building trades and skills needed to repair historic features.

"As modern building techniques and materials have resulted in a different set of standard construction skills, the teaching and application of traditional skills has fallen by the wayside," the report states, but "fortunately" there are "training programs focusing on traditional building skills, including involvement of disadvantaged youth, such as National Trust for Historic Preservation's (NTHP) Hands-On Preservation Experience (HOPE) crews, or the programs at Savannah Technical College."

Eric Curl was a Savannah Morning News reporter for 14 years. After leaving the News, he launched Savannahagenda.com, to grow awareness and engagement with local planning, zoning and development decisions, business development and community causes.

