

The Plains Post 1

Plains, Georgia

Spring 2023

Plains' main man

Plains sunrise
Main Street

In February, a day before I was to lead a Sunday prayer at my church in San Jose, it was announced that former President Jimmy Carter would begin home hospice care in Plains, Georgia. I thought I should include that in the Prayers of the People, and I did so saying, "We know Jimmy Carter as representing the best of what we can be." So many people came up to me afterward to say how much that part of the prayer touched them that I knew I had struck a nerve. As a retired newspaper reporter, that told me Carter was someone they respected and would be interested in learning more about. For nearly 20 years I've been doing occasional newsletters telling family and friends — some of whom were the people speaking to me after church — about interesting things I've been up to. So, the second week of April, I traveled to Plains to talk to as many people as I could about a man they knew as a neighbor as well as a president. I did more interviews after returning home. This is the first of three newsletters and a video that I will be publishing to report on what I learned.

Plains' main man

PLAINS, GEORGIA, as of the 2020 census, is a tiny settlement of 573 residents. There is no gas station or grocery store. No school. It's 10 miles from the nearest Waffle House over in the county seat, Americus, population 16,230. In Georgia, that puts Plains in the wilderness.



This 2014 photo of Jimmy Carter was provided by Jill Stuckey, a Carter family friend and superintendent of the Jimmy Carter National Historical Park.

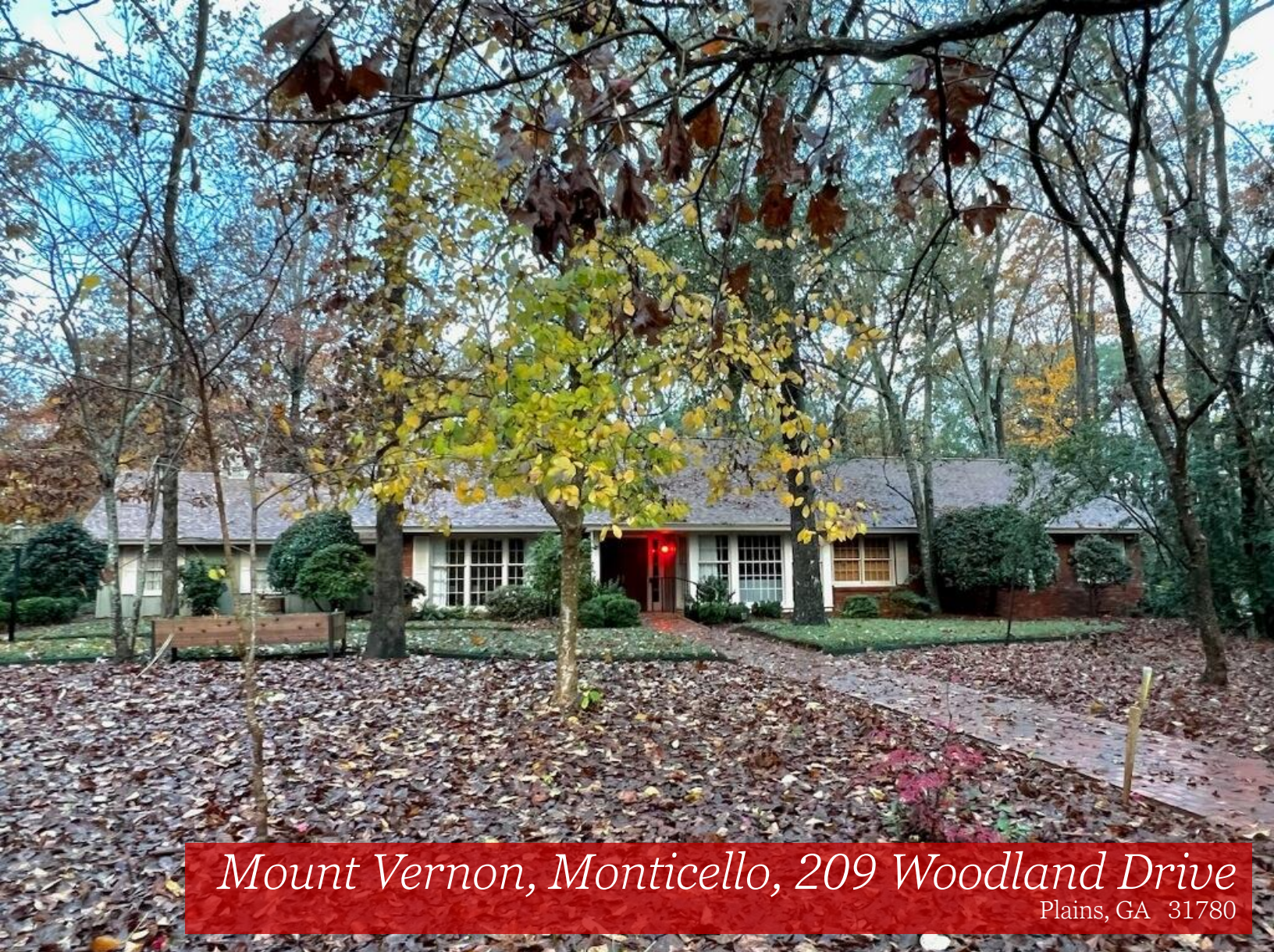
"If you've got a dog laying in the road — if he can stay there all day asleep when the cars pass by — it's that quiet," said Clara Chenault, whom I interviewed on the front porch of her double-wide mobile home just two blocks from the house of the Plains person whom you do know.

That guy is 98-year-old Jimmy Carter, 39th president of the United States of America, who announced in February that he was beginning hospice care in the four-bedroom, three-bath home where he lives with his wife, Rosalynn, at 209 Woodland Drive on the western edge of town.

Zillow, the online real estate site, puts the value of their 4,000-square-foot / 372-square-meter dwelling on a 2.4-acre / 1-hectare lot at \$236,300. Its valuation on the [Sumter County tax roll is just \\$167,066](#). The house could be the castle of Plains. But for perspective, the [median U.S. home price \(half are higher, half lower\) is just under \\$400,000](#), meaning most American homeowners have a house worth more than one belonging to one of their retired presidents.

Not that Carter is actually paying property taxes.

— *Continued on next page*



Mount Vernon, Monticello, 209 Woodland Drive

Plains, GA 31780

Jill Stuckey photo

A few days before Christmas in 1994, the Carters gave their residence to the National Park Service on the simple condition that they be allowed to live there until they are both dead and buried in the front yard. Then, the Secret Service detachment will leave and the park service will open the house to the public as the newest addition to the Jimmy Carter National Historical Park.

The park service already owns and uses the former Plains High School, where Carter graduated in 1941, as its park headquarters and museum. It operates the town train depot, once used as his presidential campaign headquarters, as a museum focused on the campaign of '76. And it has turned the Carter family farm — in the unincorporated settlement of Archery, a couple of miles / 3 kilometers west of the Woodland Drive house — into an outdoor museum explaining his boyhood.

Last year, according to [park service statistics](#), the Carter historical park drew more than 43,000 visitors to Plains, up 28% from 2021, which was a Covid year. Neither the state nor county officials I contacted could point to a study that could quantify Carter's economic impact on Plains after he decided to retire back home following his loss to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 election. But giving Plains an economic boost was an important factor in his decision, Carter has said.

— *Continued after 1 picture page*



Keeper of the Flame

Supt. Jill Stuckey, Jimmy Carter National Historical Park
Park HQ, formerly Plains High School

Plains' main man

— Continued

"There's absolutely an argument that can be made that having President Carter living in Plains, Georgia, is the equivalent economic impact of having a major company in Plains, Georgia," said Jim Livingston, executive director of the 16-county River Valley Regional Commission, a federally designated economic development agency that includes Sumter County and Plains.

Agriculture, not tourism, was Plains' economic driver from its founding in the 1840s, when three communities — one of them Plains of Dura, named for a desert location where ancient Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar erected a golden statue of himself — merged into one town. Agriculture in the American South was originally dependent on slave labor and, after the Civil War, sharecropping, slavery's close cousin, which lasted into Carter's youth on the family's farm in Archery. That legacy persists today as relative prosperity for landowners but subsistence for most everyone else. It's an issue explored in the next newsletter of this series.

That legacy is reflected in the people themselves. Most living in Plains, in Sumter County and a contiguous group of seven southwestern Georgia counties including Sumter, are descendants of slaves. Six of those counties have black majority populations ranging from Sumter's 51% to Dougherty County's 69.5%. Stewart County has a black plurality of 46%.

“... President Carter living in Plains, Georgia, the equivalent economic impact of having a major company in Plains, Georgia.”

"I wish that we could have more industry to keep our kids here, black and white, because they have to go somewhere else to work," Plains Mayor L.E. "Boze" Godwin told me at City Hall. "And I wish we could do something that people — they want to go where there's better transportation, like airports. They want to go there. And we have a hard time competing. Our problem is just economic."

Plains has lost a quarter of its population since the 2010 census although it still has twice as many people as the 231 folks who lived there in 1980, when Carter lost his reelection bid. Sumter County has lost more than 10% of its population since 2020. Meanwhile, metropolitan Atlanta, 2½ hours north by car, has grown 73% since 2000 to 6.1 million people, ranking just behind Philadelphia as the nation's [eighth largest metropolitan area](#).

The depressing statistical elements that describe Plains are common to thousands of isolated small towns across the United States. But only one small U.S. town is home to a retired resident U.S. president. Only the 500-member Mar-a-Lago Club is as exclusive an abode as Plains by that measure, a place where people call a former president their neighbor. Otherwise, the contrast between Carter and Donald Trump — indeed between Carter and all living ex-presidents and nearly all ex-presidents excluding Harry Truman, who retired to his wife's home in Independence, Missouri — is stark in terms of lifestyle and modesty.

— Continued after 1 picture page



Cotton

Near intersection of Highway 45 and Jack Slappy Road

Plains' main man

Continued —

I was unable to find any adult in Plains, either in just saying hello on the sidewalk or in my scheduled interviews, who couldn't reminisce about sharing a meal with the Carters, getting a wave as the Carters would walk or bicycle past their house, or having a picture made with the man whose toothy grin and multi-syllabic accent launched a thousand jokes.

"When I was in California, my ex-husband and I had a second honeymoon," said former Plains Mayor Pro Tem Patricia Taft, who's from Santa Clara and moved to Plains after her divorce to be near other family. "We went down to Tijuana and Ensenada (Mexico) — you know, spent some time. On the way back, we stopped to get brunch at a little restaurant. We were walking up and down the beach, and Secret Service came out said we had to leave because we were near Nixon's house (in San Clemente, California). Now I've seen Jimmy Carter and Rosalynn Carter walk hand-in-hand down (highway) 280 at night alone. I'd see them at church every day. That's because they were different kinds of presidents. I don't think there's anybody in this community that wouldn't lay down their life because of the kind of person that he is. He is what you see."

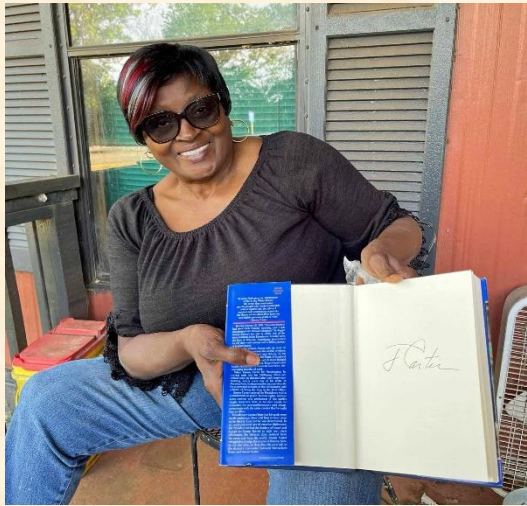
How Carter came to be his kind of president is something I will explore in the coming newsletters.



Downtown depot
Waitin' for the mornin' train

Who did I interview?

CLARA CHENAULT was born and raised in Plains. As a teenager she lived on the opposite side of Highway 280, also named Church Street, from the Carters and said she did babysitting work for a Secret Service agent. Now retired, she lives on a street named for her father, Waymon. It's only a few hundred yards long and creates a shortcut between Main Street and Carter Street. Across Waymon from her



Clara Chenault and her book autographed by her neighbor, Jimmy Carter.

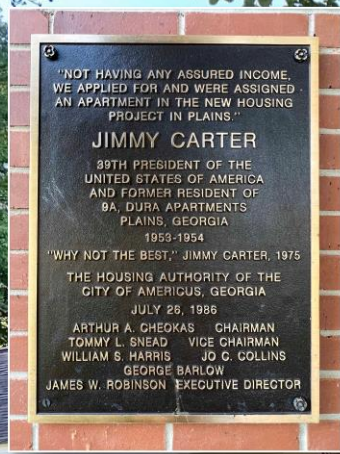
house, in the triangle formed by the three streets, sits the two-story clubhouse and playground of the Jimmy & Rosalynn Carter Unit of the [Boys & Girls Clubs of Albany](#), a cluster of nine southwestern Georgia units of the national organization that provides after-school programs for kids aged 6-18. After living around the United States and Germany with her then-husband, she came back to Plains and worked in several jobs including 14 years driving a delivery truck on the 4 a.m.-noon shift for Magnolia Manor, an assisted living center in Americus. That gave her plenty of time in the afternoon to look after students when they got out of school before the current clubhouse was built. She took care of about 65 kids, helping them with their homework and feeding them. "That's what they'd be looking for, that rice and gravy or the pork chops or whatever. I'd be happy because I knew they'd be going home full." When the Carters got involved with the Boys & Girls

Club, the former president insisted that she be paid for her work. And when Carter and a Habitat for Humanity crew built the two-story clubhouse in 1999, she learned carpentry from him and helped install the wooden trusses that hold up the roof .

LYNTON EARL "BOZE" GODWIN has been mayor of Plains for the past 39 years. In 1953, when Carter's father died, Jimmy resigned from the U.S. Navy to return to Plains and manage the family's farm business. Because he and Rosalynn had no guaranteed income, they moved into apartment 9A of the Dura Apartments — public housing — and a young Boze Godwin delivered medicine from his father's pharmacy to them. Later, Carter was leader of Godwin's Boy Scout troop. He recently sold the pharmacy, which is behind City Hall and the railroad depot on Main Street. He is a Republican and Trump voter but, like Carter, he left Plains Baptist Church, which at one time banned black people from membership, and moved to Maranatha Baptist Church, where Carter taught Sunday School. During his presidency, Carter invited Godwin to visit Camp David shortly before the famous 1978 meeting there between Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. In 2002, Carter asked Godwin to attend his Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony in Oslo, Norway. "I'm tight as he is, OK?" Godwin said. "We're both thrifty. He called me and asked me to go, and I said I don't think I can afford that. He kind of laughed. My wife got all over me, so I had to call him back that day and say, 'We're going.'"

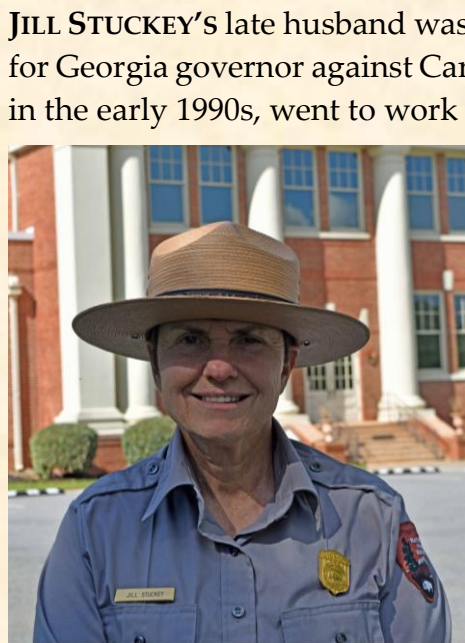


Mayor Boze Godwin



Public housing unit 9A
Paschal Street, Plains

Jill Stuckey photo



Jill Stuckey

JILL STUCKEY'S late husband was a fundraiser for Jimmy Carter beginning with his successful 1970 race for Georgia governor against Carl Sanders. She came to Atlanta from Ohio after graduating from college in the early 1990s, went to work for the state's environmental protection division, met her husband in 1994 and began doing projects with the Carters. In 1998 she moved to Plains to work on an issue with gasoline in the drinking water, joined Maranatha Baptist, bought a boarding house on Main Street and later was named superintendent of the national historical park that commemorates Carter. At some point it became a Sunday evening tradition that the Carters would walk the half-mile down Main Street for dinner with Stuckey. "So, we would have lots of people over," Stuckey said. "I'd always tell him exactly how many people I'd invited, and that was usually between 11 and 70. So he knew that there was going to be lots of folks present. ... And I never know who would show up because people would bring other people and a lot of people didn't know that President Carter was going to be there. ... People would ask him anything they wanted to ask. There was nothing off limits. There was one gentleman who brought a yellow pad of paper, and he had about five pages worth of questions. And that was one of President Carter's favorite meals because he had some really tough questions."

PATRICIA TAFT lives in Plains as a refugee from California’s housing crisis. A single mother of four after her 1984 divorce, finding decent housing in Southern California on her income “was not an option,” she said. But she had nieces in Plains. Nearby Koinonia Partners — the then-new name for Koinonia Farms, a Christian farming community founded in 1942 as a “demonstration plot for the Kingdom of God” — had begun a project to build homes using voluntary labor and donations that families could buy with no-interest mortgages paying only for the cost of materials. The concept was devised by Millard Fuller, a self-made millionaire from Alabama, who got his economics degree at Auburn University less than two hours’ drive down Highway 280 from Plains. “Koinonia Partners built my house,” Taft said. Today, we know Koinonia Partners as Habitat for Humanity, a cause to which Jimmy and Rosalynn dedicated themselves the year Taft came to Plains. Two of her daughters are medical doctors.



Patricia Taft



Solar farm
Walters Street, Plains

Notes on photos

First, I must thank Jill Stuckey for her contributions to this newsletter. Like me, she's a hobbyist photographer and was willing to share photos of places I couldn't get to in my three-day visit. Her work is featured on her personal website at <https://www.jillstuckey.com/>, and she also shot the images for the book *Ossabaw Island: A Sense of Place*, by Evan Kutzler, an assistant professor of history at Georgia Southwestern University in Americus, whom you will meet later in this newsletter series.

PLAINS SUNRISE — The business district of Plains consists primarily of a one-block row of storefronts along the south side of Main Street. Jimmy Carter's father, James Earl Carter Sr., owned a grocery store here. Today the buildings house mainly stores serving the tourists visiting Plains and include a café where the bank used to be, antique shop and the Plains Historic Inn, with seven period suites with décor from the decade of the 1920s through 1980s designed by Rosalynn Carter. Railroad tracks run along the north side. The silo and buildings at the east end are the Buffalo Peanut Company.

MOUNT VERNON, MONTICELLO, 209 WOODLAND DRIVE — At this time of year, leafy trees block the view of the Carters' home from the viewing point on Highway 280. Jill Stuckey shot this picture last fall.

KEEPER OF THE FLAME — I interviewed Jill Stuckey in her office in what once was Plains High School. The school, which graduated students after the 11th grade in Jimmy Carter's final year in 1941, was for white students only until the 1960s. It closed in 1979.

COTTON — Cotton was the symbolic crop of the antebellum South and is still widely grown, although peanuts grown by Jimmy Carter are an important symbol of Plains. This small patch of cotton plants was in an isolated corner of a much larger field, leading me to believe they were protected from being plowed under by tractors preparing the field for planting a new crop or perhaps something else.

DOWNTON DEPOT — This was the symbolic HQ of Carter's presidential campaign and from where town residents boarded a charter train to Washington for his inauguration. But the sign that catches my eye is the round near the peak of the roof, the herald of the Seaboard Coast Line (SCL) Railroad. That's the railroad I worked on my first two summers home from college in Hamlet, North Carolina. Plains was located on an SCL branch line that is now owned by the Georgia Southwestern Railroad (GSWR). The SAM (Savannah, Americus & Montgomery) Railroad operates tourist trains from Cordele, Georgia, west through Americus to Plains and on to Archery, where the Carter family farm is located.

PUBLIC HOUSING UNIT 9A — Discounting the White House, Carter is the only president to live in public housing.

SOLAR FARM — Carter erected these solar panels on his land after retiring to Plains. They produce electricity equivalent to 60% of the town's usage. The panels Carter installed on the White House roof were removed by Ronald Reagan.

PLAY AND PORK CHOPS — Carter raised a \$2.5-million endowment in 2022 for the Plains Boys & Girls Club, which had been closed for a decade.



Play and pork chops
Boys & Girls Club, Plains