

Earn rewards! for +1 Savannah Bucks
Rewards

VIDEO: A monumental day at Pin Point

Posted: November 20, 2011 - 1:10am | **Updated:** November 20, 2011 - 8:00am

By [Chuck Mobley](#)

With a powerful and poignant mixture of preaching and preservation, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and the community of Pin Point celebrated the unveiling of a historical marker and the dedication of a heritage museum Saturday.

"I am a son of Pin Point," said Thomas, who was appointed to the Supreme Court in 1991.

The justice was clearly comfortable inside the Sweetfield of Eden Baptist Church, where the day-long celebration began. Thomas laughed heartily as several of the other speakers talked about their youthful experiences together and referred to him by his Pin Point nickname, "Boy."

But he was quite serious as he explained what Pin Point, which was settled in the 1890s by African-Americans from adjacent islands, has meant to him.

"I had always hoped that I'd bring honor to Pin Point," said Thomas, whose wife, mother and sister sat in the tightly-packed audience, along with a large number of cousins.

The justice still felt the tug of his early experiences in Pin Point, which he said, sat "at the edge of the water, at the edge of society, and at the edge of Savannah."

As he and other small children walked to catch the bus that would take them to Haven Home School, said Thomas, the older boys would shepherd them along the road and hold their hands.

Once he moved to Savannah in 1954 and began attending Florance Street School, Thomas said wistfully, he realized "there were no cousins there."

Frequent, spontaneous calls of "amen" rang from the audience as Thomas and the other speakers – who included Pin Point Betterment Association President Hanif Haynes, Chatham County Commissioner Helen Stone and Georgia Historical Society President and CEO W. Todd Groce – delivered their remarks.

Combined community choirs performed at the event's start and a benediction from the church's minister, Bishop Thomas Sills, accompanied the unveiling of the monument.

Songs by the McIntosh County Shouters, a storied group of performers whose talents recall and commemorate the slavery experience, lent that same flavor to the second event of the day, the dedication of the Pin Point Heritage Museum.

Most of the people who attended the monument unveiling simply walked from the church to the museum, which is a state-of-the-art restoration of the old A.S. Varn and Son seafood factory.

Built in 1929, the multi-building complex was once the biggest employer in Pin Point as it sent canned oysters and other seafood products to restaurants along the East Coast. But the factory closed in 1985, and the buildings eventually fell into disrepair.

By 2010, when the restoration began, the dock where oyster boats once unloaded was in danger of disappearing into the marsh, said Emily Owens of Dallas, who oversaw the project from start to finish.

"I'm thrilled" with the final product, said Owens, of Crow Holdings, a firm that directs the investments of the Trammell Crow family and its business partners.

Harlan Crow, the son of the late Trammell Crow, is "my good friend," and undertook this project "against my advice," Justice Thomas said.

The resultant transformation of the old factory dazzled those who attended the dedication.

The museum will provide a "lasting legacy" for the Pin Point community, said Savannah Mayor Otis Johnson.

Earl Haynes, one of the officers of the Pin Point Betterment Association, said what the museum shows, and how it explains Pin Point's history, exceeded his "wildest dreams."

THE MEMORIAL SIGN WORDS

Pin Point Community

Pin Point was settled in 1896 by former slaves from Ossabaw, Green, and Skidaway Islands. Sweetfield of Eden Baptist Church, founded in Pin Point in 1897, was a successor to Ossabaw's Hinder Me Not Church and also served as the community's school until a Rosenwald School opened in 1926. Construction of the Pin Point Hall followed, and it remains a focal point of the community. Pin Point was the site of several coastal industries including shrimping, crabbing, and oyster harvesting operations. Among these seafood factories were Ben Bond and John Anderson Seafood, which opened in 1900, and A.S. Varn and Sons, which operated from 1926 to 1985. Pin Point is the birthplace of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas.

Erected by the Georgia Historical Society and the Pin Point Community Betterment Association.

One of the museum's many stories

The Pin Point Heritage Museum has put the old factory back together and features videos, audios, and displays of seafood processing.

Its color palate features such Lowcountry standards as haint blue, and its posters use the fonts that once adorned products canned by the A.S. Varn & Son Oyster Seafood factory.

But what truly sets it apart is its moving portrayals of the people who once worked at the factory.

The story of John Henry Haynes, whose nickname was Bacon, is an example. Haynes had an "encyclopedic" knowledge of the Moon River, said the plaque. "Before he died," further read the account, "he asked that his casket be placed on this dock for a short time before the burial service — a final chance to be near the water that was so important to him. After fulfilling this wish, the community and casket bearing his body continued on to the cemetery."

Fittingly enough, the plaque now looks out on that dock.

Pin Point timeline

1880s to 1890s: Several hurricanes strike Ossabaw Island, and most of its African-American population decides to depart for the mainland. The Hinder Me Not congregation moves to Pin Point, where it establishes the Sweetfield of Eden Church. Its members, and other African-Americans, settle on land sold to them by Henry McAlpin.

1926: A.S. Varn Sr. opens the A.S. Varn & Son Oyster Seafood factory. It immediately becomes the prime source of income and employment in the community. Its canned oysters are sent to restaurants as far away as New York.

1929: After a hurricane wrecks the site, Varn rebuilds the plant.

1961: "Moon River," the Johnny Mercer standard which immortalizes the tidal river that flows in front of Pin Point, wins an Academy Award.

1966: A.S. Varn Sr. dies at Candler Hospital.

1971: A.S. Varn Jr. files a federal suit seeking to halt the use of mirex, a fire ant spray. The use of the insecticide, said Varn, is killing oysters and blue crabs.

1973: A.S. Varn Jr. files a suit in superior court seeking \$50,000 in damages to his business caused by the Skidaway Island Bridge. Built in 1965-67, the bridge impedes the ebb and flow of Shipyard Creek, leading to a silt buildup that threatens the seafood plant, the suit alleges.

1985: A.S. Varn and Son closes.

1991: A.S. Varn Jr. dies and Pin Point native son Clarence Thomas becomes a U.S. Supreme Court associate justice.

November of 2010: Crow Holdings in Dallas, an investment firm, announces that it plans to restore the long-closed seafood factory and reopen it as a heritage museum in late 2011.

Nov. 20, 2011: The Georgia Historical Society and the Pin Point Community Betterment Association dedicate a historical marker at Sweetfield of Eden Baptist Church, and the Pin Point Heritage Museum holds its grand opening.

Sources: Savannah Morning News files and interviews; 2009 study of Pin Point done by the Georgia Conservancy; Connect Savannah.